index librorum prohibitorum

SP

とある魔術の禁書目録（インデックス）SP

鎌池和馬
イラスト／はいむらきよたか・冬川基
漫画／はいむらきよたか

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The stories related to Index that had not been published by Dengeki Bunko have been collected in one book! This short story collection supplements the main story!

Stiyl Magnus

A single mission is given to Stiyl by the Anglican Church's Necessarius. When Stiyl arrives in Academy City once more, his way is blocked by Theodosia Electra, a fellow member of Necessarius. The reason she is fighting Stiyl lies with a girl named Patricia Birdway. A battle between magicians over the techniques of the Dvergr from Norse mythology begins.

Mark Space

Mark, a magician from the British magic cabal the Dawn-Colored Sunlight, has been instructed to save his boss's little sister. Mark managed to safely make contact with his boss's sister aboard the survey ship, the Blue Research, but a magician who seems to be from a different cabal attacks. Mark plans to rescue his boss's sister using his personal magic that uses tarot cards.

Kamijou Touma

While walking through District 21 of Academy City, Kamijou Touma and Index run into a magician named Fleiss. Due to Kamijou's usual misfortune, he somehow ends up on the run from Academy City along with Fleiss. In the process, Kamijou hears of some ridiculous information from Fleiss about an unknown lifeform on Mars.

Uiharu Kazari

A carjacking occurs in Academy City. As a member of Judgment, Uiharu Kazari ends up helping resolve the situation. The ultimate goal of the carjacking is a large scale terrorist attack on Academy City. In order to stop a large special vehicle roaring along at 120 kph, Uiharu struggles alongside Yomikawa Aiho of Anti-Skill.

Kamachi Kazuma

This is the road signs series. They seem to be all jumbled up. By the way, how many signs do you think they can fit on a single pole?

[Products of Dengeki Bunko]

Toaru Majutsu no Index 1~22
Toaru Majutsu no Index SS 1 & 2
New Testament Toaru Majutsu no Index 1 & 2
Heavy Object
Heavy Object: Adoption War
Heavy Object: Shadow of the Giants

Illustrator: Haimura Kiyotaka

I'm originally from Onomichi City of Hiroshima Prefecture. Now I live in a certain area of Kantou living a half hikikomori life while drawing illustrations.

カバー／図書印刷

とある魔術の禁書目録SP

鎌池和馬
イラスト／はいむらきよたか・冬川基
漫画／はいむらきよたか

“We have no obligation to go along with the Anglican Church or Academy City’s mission of self-satisfaction.”

Boss of the magic cabal known as the Dawn-Colored Sunlight — **Leivinia Birdway**

Designed by Hirokazu Watanabe(2725 Inc.)

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イラスト／はいむらきよたか・冬川基
漫画／はいむらきよたか

とある魔術の禁書目録(インデックス)SP

ステイル＝マグヌス

THE PREPARATIONS ARE COMPLETE.
NOW WE JUST HAVE TO WAIT FOR THE BOSS'S INSTRUCTIONS.
IS THIS OKAY?
IF WE ARE OVERHEARD BY ANYONE...
YES, WELL.
IN THAT CASE...
WE'D JUST HAVE TO "ELIMINATE" THEM, RIGHT?
Green Onion
Safety First
THE CLIMAX OF MISFORTUNE IS HERE ALREADY!!?

Get back here!!
Stop!!
A GIRL
?!!
DAMMIT !!!
I got her wrapped up in all this?!
DAMN !!
HE TOOK THE BOSS AS A HOS-TAGE ?!!
AAAAAH!!
B-
BOSS!?
WHAT!?

STIYL MAGNUS

Part 1

The darkness smelled of something burning.

The location was a small city in Siberia.

A slight crackling sound reverberated through the city at night. Orange flames seemed to wipe away the darkness in places. Things were not burning normally. The streets, the streetlights, the benches, the vending machines…regardless of what it was, bright flames were scattered around on them as if the flames were a sticky mud.

“Really…” sighed Stiyl Magnus.

The cigarette at the edge of his mouth glowed brighter from the additional oxygen.

He had shoulder-length hair dyed red, earrings in his ears, silver rings on all 10 of his fingers, and a barcode pattern tattoo under his right eye. He also smelled of perfume and cigarettes, so no one would have thought that large British man was a priest. They would have still doubted it even though he was wearing a priest’s habit and could shut his eyes and recite the Bible from memory.

And…

(I head out all over the world, but it’s always the jobs like this I end up with.)

The bottom of his shoe trampled on something hard.

It was a human face burned black to the extent that not even the expression could be read.

It looked like a failed attempt at making a cookie. There was not even the slightest moist feeling in the portions that were split open.

“Now then…”

Stiyl stuck an arm into his habit and pulled out a small schedule book.

He opened it and brought the hand holding his cigarette close in so he could read it by the light.

"…So my next job is in Academy City."

♦

Stiyl Magnus. Simply put, his job was to defeat the evil magicians who made people suffer. But thinking back on that previous scene would immediately tell one just how much a difference there was between that explanation and the reality of his job.

Stiyl belonged to Necessarius, the 0th Parish of the Anglican Church. That organization killed all magicians who would bring negative effects to society. And they left the corpses in a state where they could not have a proper funeral or memorial service. Their reasoning was that trash that had strayed from the proper path should suffer even after they died. *They would not allow the dead to flee to heaven*.

Stiyl himself used rune magic, but the inquisition viewed lies, tricks, torture, violence, or any other means justified in defeating their heretical enemies. The trash they hated so much may say that was unfair, but they did not listen to heretics, so it did not matter.

Stiyl had burned 19 members of a Western magic cabal to death in Siberia. They had felt that people who were merely born had no hope and that people only received true hope upon dying and being reincarnated. As such, they had been enjoying themselves in "giving hope" to some young children they had felt sorry for.

This very same Stiyl was now getting nervous in front of a girl.

He was in an underground mall in Academy City. Academy City was a psychic powers development organization that took up the western third of Tokyo, but the fact that he was in an underground mall was the more important part. It was underground, but it did not have a damp atmosphere to it. Instead, the brightly polished floor was lit up by the fluorescent lights and LED light bulbs that were bundles of LEDs. On the other side of a large window covering one side of the passageway, young waitresses were energetically working in a café.

Stiyl was standing in a smoking section set up in a corner of that underground mall. Adults wearing suits and lab coats were breathing out smoke as if to say, "Even so, we love smoking!!"

A girl was also standing in the smoking area.

Or rather, she was grabbing Stiyl's arm and trying to drag him out of that area.

The girl said, "Hey!! Why is a 14 year old child here!? Secondhand smoke is harmful. This completely defeats the purpose of having a designated smoking area!"

The girl was 135 cm tall and looked about 12, so she was not very persuasive.

Stiyl sighed and pulled a faded package from his pocket.

“I’m here because it’s polite to go here when you smoke.”

“A 14 year old is breaking the rules if he smokes regardless of where he is! As a teacher, I cannot just ignore this!”

Stiyl ended up being dragged out of the smoking area and even had his box of cigarettes confiscated.

But she was a teacher.

Despite how that girl looked, she was a high school teacher in Academy City.

(…Why did things end up like this?)

Stiyl brought his hand up to his forehead.

Just after he had finished his previous job, Stiyl had been told he had to head to Academy City for his next job. He had spent an entire day getting on an airplane, crossing national borders, receiving permission to enter Academy City, and dropping his luggage off at the hotel. He was guessing his job would once again not be something decent and he had decided to go smoke while he waited for his next instructions, but…

He had been caught there by that minimum teacher, Tsukuyomi Komoe.

“Sigh…”

“Mh? That’s a heavy sigh for someone so young. Is something wrong?”

“It’s nothing,” Stiyl responded as he forced his arm out of Komoe-sensei’s desperate grip.

However, he was a 14 year old who did not get many opportunities to hold hands with a girl like that.

(…Dammit. This age difference is just wrong. What am I doing?)

Stiyl’s body temperature had risen slightly, but he was not a perverted lolicon. Stiyl’s actual age was 14, so it was only natural for him to fall in love with a girl of the same generation.

However, Komoe-*sensei*’s actual age was something else entirely. To Stiyl, she was more of a mature woman…or possibly an onee-san type.

“So what is it that you want with me, *sensei*?”

“My lecture as a teacher has not even begun. Don’t try to smoothly imply it’s over! You aren’t going to smoke, right? Promise sensei that you won’t smoke anymore.”

Komoe-sensei was now grabbing at the waist area of Stiyl’s clothes and looking up at him. Her eyes stared straight ahead and did not move even slightly. It did not even take 2 seconds before Stiyl could not stand it anymore and averted his gaze. He wondered in his heart how that was supposed to be a lecture.

And then a cell phone started to ring.

It was a light melody that had likely been downloaded from somewhere. As that ring tone made clear, it was not Stiyl’s phone that was ringing. Komoe-sensei rummaged around and pulled out her cell phone.

“Yes, this is Komoe-sensei.”

The conversation began. Komoe-sensei spoke leisurely with whoever was on the other end.

“Yes, yes. That priest is here right now.”

“Hey!” Stiyl yelled out and started seriously considered trying to take the cell phone from her. She had no way of knowing, but he had snuck into Academy City on a covert mission.

Meanwhile, the teacher who was utterly ignorant of that fact smiled and switched her cell phone to speaker phone. She then held it out toward Stiyl.

A voice came from the phone.

It was a boy’s voice.

“Ahh… Are you really here…?”

“I don’t want to hear your voice any more than you want to hear mine.”

Stiyl’s voice was completely flat. As she held the phone, Komoe-sensei started looking flustered, but there was nothing she could do.

The voice over the phone continued casually.

“What? Did you get stuck with another dangerous ‘job’? Well, that’s fine. By the way, are you okay with spicy foods? We’re having jjigae today.”

“What do you mean, ‘well, that’s fine’? I don’t need your permission to-…”

Stiyl started to reply, but he trailed off partway through.

What had that boy said?

“Jjigae? What?”

“Oh, you aren’t familiar with it? The weather’s been getting cold lately, so I was thinking of going with a Korean stew. I got a magazine that had a special on Korean recipes. Jjigae doesn’t look too difficult.”

“That’s not what I meant,” said Stiyl cutting the boy off before asking his question again. “Why do I have to know what you’re having to eat tonight? And why does it matter if I’m okay with spicy foods?”

“Eh? But aren’t you eating here tonight?”

“Hell no,” Stiyl spat out.

Perhaps because she had seen his expression straight on, Komoe-sensei started getting even more flustered while stammering.

“Oh, right. Is there anything you simply refuse to eat? I’m at the supermarket right now, so tell me if there’s anything you want left out.”

“…Like hell I’m going to tell you anything.”

“Well, don’t complain later. I’m filling my basket with all sorts of spicy things from around the world to season it with like Yatsubusa and red peppers.”

“That’s not what I meant! Are you even listening? I’m not going. I’m definitely not going…Hey!”

Before he could finish speaking, the line was disconnected from the other end.

He stood there blankly for a bit, but Komoe-sensei finally started saying something while trembling.

“B-but sensei can’t stand spicy things…”

“…Why did that boy call his teacher about his dinner plans?”

“Eh? We’re all eating dinner together today.”

“And I’m also curious as to how he knew I was here…”

“I emailed him when I first spotted you. I told him to buy some more ingredients because someone else would be joining us.”

When Stiyl saw her puzzled look, he slightly averted his gaze.

It seemed the student took after the teacher in some ways.

“Won’t you come?” asked Komoe-sensei.

“No, I won’t,” Stiyl responded strongly and definitely before leaving.

He turned around and saw that Komoe-sensei was trying to follow him, so he ran full speed and lost her.

“Really now…” he finally sighed after leaving the underground mall and walking alone along a street.

It was so ridiculous that he just couldn’t stand it.

Stiyl Magnus was a magician of Necessarius, the 0th Parish of the Anglican Church. He was a blood-stained person whose solution to over 70% of problems that occurred was assassination. He had burned 19 magicians to death the day before and he was thinking about how to write the report for the incident.

And yet he felt like he would forget that in conversations like the previous one.

He felt like he would forget all those truths.

It was most likely the same feeling as when one looked at fiction. A girl at a rebellious age would cry while watching a drama with a theme of familial love. No matter how opposed it was to yourself, just seeing it filled you with emotions.

That was why there was a strong feeling of despondency after it was over.

The worst moment was the one when you turned off the TV and saw once more what your situation was.

As if it had been intentionally timed, his cell phone started ringing.

It was an email from one of his colleagues in Necessarius.

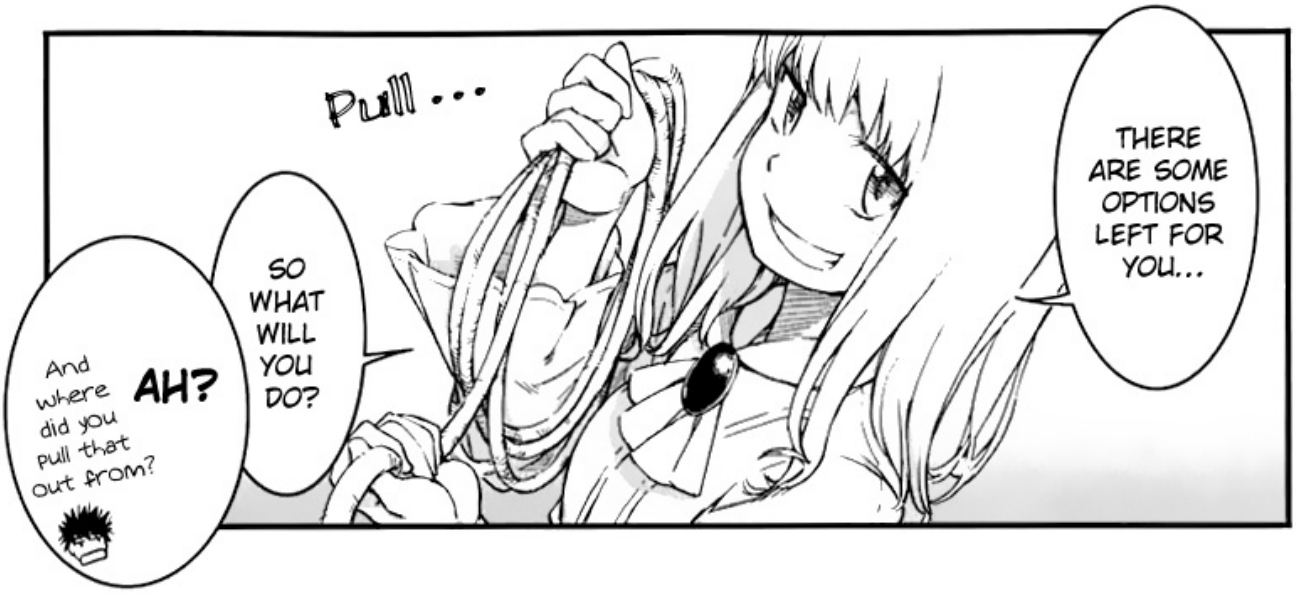
“Here is your job. The mission description is in the attachment. Follow what it says and take care of the traitor.”

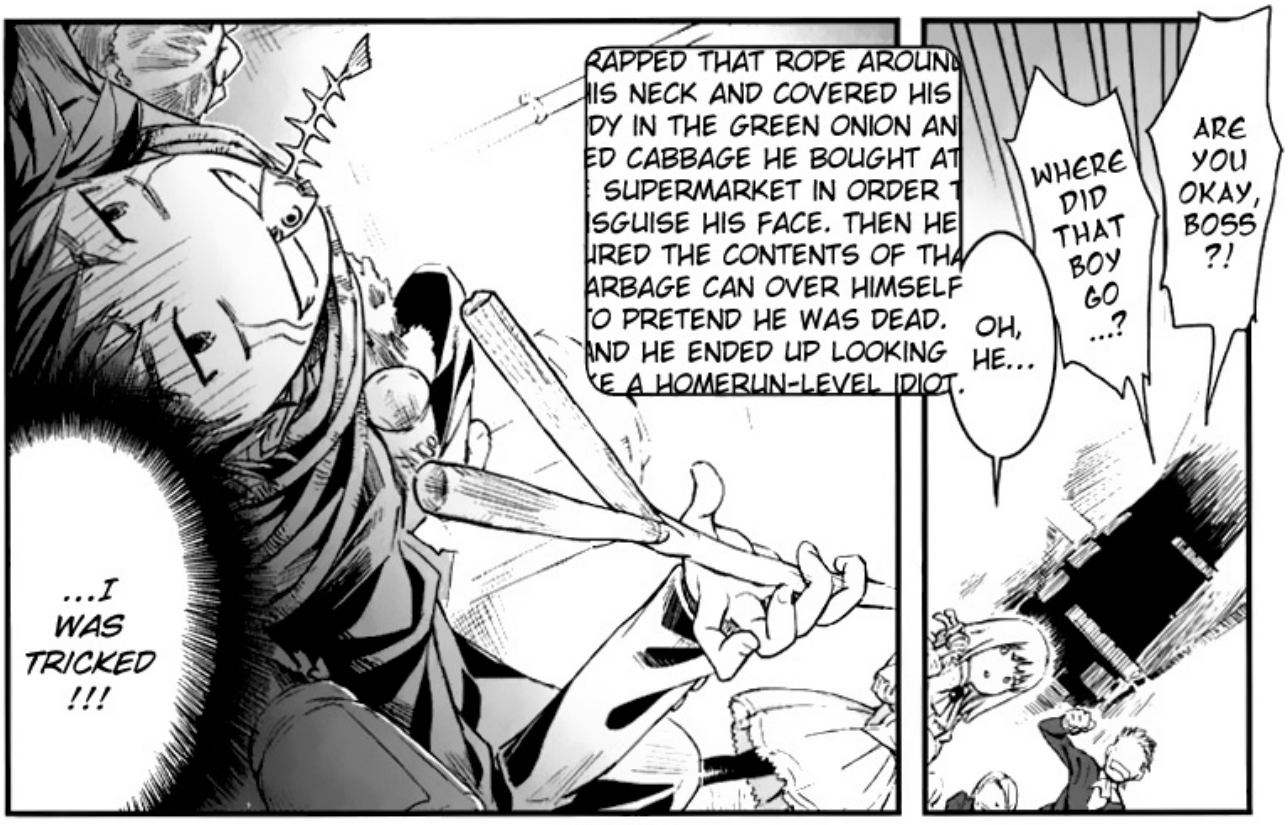
Stiyl nodded in confirmation.

Necessarius’s coldhearted report continued on and on.

A stimulating situation started spreading out before him and it was far removed from the peaceful appearance of things.

A
NOW THEN ...
A
rustle
YOU HAVE DONE AN EXCELLENT JOB KIDNAPPING ME ...
A
DAMMIT, I NEED TO GET OUT OF HERE ...
THERE'S NOWHERE TO RUN.
A
DID YOU THINK I WAS JUST AN INNOCENT GIRL WHO HAD THE BAD LUCK TO BE THERE? HM?
A
BUT I'M THE BOSS OF THEIR GROUP, THE DAWN-COLORED SUNLIGHT.
THOSE WHO HAVE BARED THEIR FANGS AGAINST US MUST BE PUNISHED IN RETURN.
THAT IS HOW CABALS LIKE US DO THINGS.
Hmm...
THEN WHAT AM I SUPPOSED TO DO?!!
MISFORTUNE


Pull ...
THERE ARE SOME OPTIONS LEFT FOR YOU...
SO WHAT WILL YOU DO?
AH?
And where did you pull that out from?


RAPPED THAT ROPE AROUN
IIS NECK AND COVERED HIS
DY IN THE GREEN ONION AN
ED CABBAGE HE BOUGHT AT
SUPERMARKET IN ORDER T
SGUISE HIS FACE. THEN HE
IRED THE CONTENTS OF THA
ARBAGE CAN OVER HIMSELF
O PRETEND HE WAS DEAD.
ND HE ENDED UP LOOKING
E A HOMERUN-LEVEL IDIOT.
...I WAS TRICKED !!!
OH, HE...
WHERE DID THAT BOY GO ...?
ARE YOU OKAY, BOSS ?!

YOUR TENACITY IS AS GREAT AS A HARMFUL INSECT'S.
HONE-STLY.
Kick
Ahn!

BUT WHAT CAN YOU DO ABOUT THIS ?
I JUST CAN'T COME TO LOVE THE RECENT GUNS FROM THE SCIENCE SIDE...
BUT IT SEEMS THESE FLINTLOCK ONES ARE A DIFFERENT MATTER.
A GUN ...?!
AND MOST IMPORTANTLY, GETTING TO ENJOY THE TIME SPENT LOADING THE BULLET LIKE THIS IS THE BEST...
DON'T YOU THINK ?
BEAR

Part 2

The location specified on his phone was a bank near the station in District 7.

It was not all that late, but all the lights were already off. Since banks had short business hours and since Academy City's last bus and train were matched to the time the students had to be home from school, the bank was completely deserted by the time the sun set.

It should have been locked up for the night, but for some reason one door was not locked.

Stiyl turned the knob and stepped inside the dark building. He headed further inside while keeping his footsteps silent and came to a hall with the receptionist counter and long benches lined up within it.

A single woman was standing there.

The woman was hiding her form within the darkness. She appeared to be around 40 or possibly a little younger. Her hair was a mix of blonde and silver, but it was simply because her hair was damaged. She wore a baggy white top and faded white jeans.

She was Stiyl's colleague.

Her name was Theodosia Electra.

"Thank you very much for keeping to the schedule and being right on time."

"…Enough with the greetings. What's the situation?" Stiyl asked angrily and Theodosia pulled a small matchbox out of a basket hanging from her arm.

"The data is in here."

"Hmph."

Stiyl took the small box and looked at the matches inside questioningly.

(…So she's changed her main spell yet again.)

She was either very talented or just an idiot who got tired of things quickly because Theodosia was constantly changing what Norse magic based spell she used. To be honest, even Stiyl, her comrade, had not grasped what her habits and characteristics were.

Meanwhile, Theodosia puffed her chest out confidently.

“I’m using a fairy tale-like method where the visual data is displayed when you light a match! Doesn’t it remind you of the Little Match Girl? Isn’t it just exquisite!?”

“Sigh… So a woman in her late thirties who has children is going on about a fairy tale heroine? You have four sons and eight daughters. What am I supposed to do? Do you want me to look down on you with contempt? Or do you want me to pity you?”

“Ngh!? I won’t lose heart with just that! Don’t you think I have misfortune on the level of that girl who froze to death in the middle of winter!?”

“…I have yet to meet someone who constantly goes on about how much misfortune they have that was also a decent person.”

Stiyl sounded irritated to the bottom of his heart and he pulled out a match from the small box and lit it on the side of the box.

When he looked into the flame, he could indeed see an image.

It seemed to be holding quite a bit of data. He could even see the thorough details. Stiyl started to rethink his opinion of Theodosia when…

The match burned out.

A slight sizzling sound came from Stiyl’s fingers that were holding the end of the matchstick.

“Hot!?”

Stiyl frantically cast the match aside and stomped on it.

He specialized in using fire, but he had not thought he would be burned there.

“Eh heh heh. There is about 40 minutes worth of video data.”

While trembling, he turned toward Theodosia.

“…And how are you planning on overcoming the issue of the match not lasting that long?”

“Heh heh heh. Don’t worry. The next match, the next match! If you worry too much about getting a bit burned, you lose!”

As she had said not to worry about it, he made Theodosia hold the rest of the matches. After burning through about 30 matches, he had finally gone through all of the data.

“M-my fingers are in a pretty serious condition here…”

The woman who was almost 40 had tears in her eyes, but Stiyl completely ignored her.

What he had learned about the job was as follows.

…Theodosia Electra was chasing the traitor.

…During her chase, the traitor had fled into Academy City.

…As Stiyl had just finished up a job nearby, he had been called in to aid her.

…Not even Theodosia herself knew what exactly the traitor had done.

…Apparently, the traitor was a very dangerous existence to the United Kingdom.

…The way things were going, there was a possibility the lives of the ninety million British citizens were in danger.

“According to the additional information, the traitor has an escort. It seemed rather dangerous, so I was a bit worried if I was on my own.”

“What a pain. Is it a magic cabal?” Stiyl spat out.

The term “magic cabal” may have made them sound rather grandiose, but the Anglican Church viewed them as nothing more than collections of criminals. If a group was going to rob a bank, they would divide up the roles. Someone would put together the plan, someone would gather the weapons, someone would attack the bank, someone would carry the money, someone would take care of the money laundering, and so on. In the same way, magic cabals could be made into all sorts of different organizations. They also often divided up roles with everything from providing funds and skills to securing a position in normal society.

Also, there was something called the Job Counter that was an unspoken agreement among magic cabals. Just as the spread of computer viruses gave life to the security software business, the appearance of a magic cabal that killed people would cause a magic cabal that acted as guards to appear. When a magic cabal that claimed to rescue people for free depending on the spell used appeared, a magic cabal that obstructed them because they had too much charisma would appear. In that way, the world of magic business would repeat the cycle of spreading chaotically and weeding out what was unnecessary.

Stiyl sighed.

There were a lot of different magic cabals, but if this one was aiding the traitor…

“In other words, I’m up against another group of people with a screw loose? I just got done roasting 19 of them in Siberia.”

But then Theodosia lightly shook her head.

“No, no. The traitor has only one helper.”

“…Just one? Is it a guest from the cabal…? So this person is enough to overwhelm Necessarius? This person must be quite something.”

“Yes,” Theodosia said with a smile and nodded. “*After all, the helper is me*.”

Stiyl immediately tried to jump back, but he did not make it in time.

Theodosia lit a match in her hand.

A light even less reliable than a candle flickered in the darkness.

And then the area expanded.

(!?)

He should have been in that bank that was devoid of illumination.

Even if it was a large bank, he was still in Japan. The size of buildings was limited and most things gave a cramped impression.

But…

The next thing he knew, everything was flat all the way to the horizon in every direction. The floor was the tile of the rooms within the bank and round pillars and long benches were lined up at even intervals. Fluorescent lights dotted the ceiling all the way to the horizon like guide lights on a runway. The space itself was odd, but the parts making it up were all normal parts of the bank.

It was as if the area had spread in the same way darkness was pushed away by the light of Theodosia’s match.

Stiyl stared forward.

Theodosia was hanging her head down and giggling.

“Eventually, your *real orders* will reach you. They will tell you to defeat the traitor and to watch out for the helper. That would have been a problem, so I called you in before that could happen.”

“…I see.”

“Hee hee hee. Are you surprised? What does it feel like to be stabbed in the back by your most trusted comrade? To be honest, it was painful for me to do.”

“Ha ha ha ha ha!! So that’s it!!”

“Huh?”

Theodosia was utterly shocked.

Something was wrong.

Stiyl Magnus was not shocked. In fact, his face was shining happily.

“Ahh, you got me!! You really got me there. Heh heh heh heh! Oh, how sad. I’m so sad my chest feels like it will just split open, but now I have a justified reason why I have to mercilessly kick your ass! Whatever shall I do? I’m just so sad that I’ve started saying strange things that don’t match the context, haven’t I? Ah ha ha ha ha ha ha!!”

“U-ugyahh!? You’re saying all sorts of insincere things! Normally you should be gritting your teeth at this unexpected betrayal!”

“I’ll roast you.”

A roar exploded out.

A red sword made of flames extended from Stiyl’s right hand. A pillar illuminated by its light had a laminated card stuck to it. The card had a rune letter displayed on it and it was the source of Stiyl’s power.

“G A S T T H. T F I A S T R I C! (Bring the flames to my hand. Its form is the sword and its role is execution!)” shouted Stiyl and a sword of blue flames appeared from his left hand.

At some point, dozens of rune cards had appeared on the floor and on the pillars lined up at even intervals. The more of those cards there were around, the stronger Stiyl’s magic was. With just that many, he could turn a human body to ash even through a heat resistant suit.

“Die!” shouted Stiyl as he swung the two flame swords down at Theodosia.

But just before he did…

“Hey, that’s dangerous.”

Stiyl’s flame swords flew through thin air. They passed by just in front of Theodosia. She had not moved. At some point, Stiyl’s position had moved back slightly.

(What…!?)

Theodosia then lit a match and lightly tossed it toward Stiyl.

It was as if she were tossing a grenade.

"!!"

Just after Stiyl jumped backwards, the match exploded. The flat area wrapped in dimness was suddenly filled with light.

(That flame…!?)

Flames filled an area with a diameter of a few meters as if blocking the path between Theodosia and Stiyl. And it did not end with just one. As if creating a line of fire, a few more explosions occurred at even intervals.

She lit a new match and stabbed its small flame into the flames of the explosions.

When she did, the line of explosions changed direction like a falling line of dominos and headed straight for Stiyl.

He immediately swung his flame swords, but his opponent's explosive power was greater.

"Gwaahh!?"

In the end, Stiyl was blown back a good ways and rolled a few meters on the ground when he landed. The hard tile scraped at his skin sending pain running through his body.

Stiyl stood up and created a new flame sword, but Theodosia showed no sign of tension on her face.

"It's no use. You cannot reach me with that."

With a smile on her face, Theodosia held a matchbox in her hand.

She lightly waved it back and forth making a clattering noise and an intense headwind started blowing. That gust of wind held magical meaning. It could stop Stiyl from moving forward and if he swung his flame sword then, the explosive flames of a few thousand degrees he himself was creating could be blown back at him.

(That spell certainly has plenty of variations…)

It had extended the space, put distance between herself and her enemy, created explosions of flames, and had created a headwind.

It was the first time he had seen the spells that were coming from that matchbox, but…

(I can't let that attack power fool me. *Those are all defensive spells*. They're all used to distance me.)

After figuring that out, Stiyl smiled.

"…A spell from Norse mythology…and specifically from Iceland."

"Bgh! You already figured it out!?"

"Over there, flames are said to be used to guard treasure. That means your flames are defensive. And they are not used to protect the magic user herself. …The traitor you are guarding is nearby."

"Wh-wh-wh-what could you possibly be talking a-a-about!?"

"That matchstick refers to Skírnir's Staff. It is a spiritual item with four runes carved into it that was prepared to force Gerðr to marry. Ha ha. Combining the flames used to protect treasure and the staff used to steal treasure certainly is an interesting way to use it. To have it carry out the role of stealing from Skírnir's Staff and the role of protecting from the flames, you must have optimized an original pattern for the layout of the runes."

"Tch!!" Theodosia clicked her tongue and lit another match. "Go to hell!!"

The flame that was as small as a candle's flame swelled up all at once.

An explosive wind was created and the mass of explosions increased seemingly infinitely as they headed for Stiyl like a line of dominos.

But…

"Sorry, but that won't work on me anymore."

With a roar, all of the flames suddenly went out.

"Once I've analyzed the spell, calculating out a countermeasure is simple."

Stiyl had swung down the thick sole of his shoe and *stomped on the flames from above*. Oddly enough, that had completely put out Theodosia's attack like he had been putting out a cigarette.

After stomping on the flames, he was completely unharmed.

"In the story of Skírnir's Staff, Gerðr herself was protected as treasure by great flames. How do you think people in ancient times would think of overcoming those flames? By jumping over the flames with a horse."

Stiyl rubbed the last flickering embers off on the floor and then showed the sole of his shoe to Theodosia.

The "ehwaz" rune that meant horse was written there in a red liquid.

By passing magic power through his own blood and activating the rune that defended against the flames, he had forced open the deactivation key hidden within the spell.

“Heh heh. Not bad.”

Theodosia laughed calmly and looked at Stiyl.

There was strength in her gaze.

“But I can’t let myself be pushed back by just that!!”

She slid open the matchbox with her thumb and poured a great quantity of matches out. Just one of those matches could create a large explosion and now all of those spiritual items exploded in midair.

She was trying to overpower him.

Stiyl had only one “ehwaz” rune.

Even if that was the weakness of her spell, it was not a problem if she could overwhelm the power of that one rune and crush him all at once.

Theodosia thought he was dead.

And then Stiyl’s flame sword sliced through the blast.

“Wha-!?”

As Theodosia cried out in shock, he charged in gripping his single flame sword.

He grinned and said, “Theodosia, I have no duty to tell you this, but you cannot win a battle between runes with sheer quantity like that. This is an issue of quality over quantity. No matter how many you use, the result will be the same.”

He swung down his sword made of burning red flames.

“Odin of Norse mythology said that proper runes held the greatest power when the most suitable letter for the location and situation was used. They are not something you can just start putting around at random. …Even if you try to crush him with numbers, you cannot defeat a natural enemy who you clearly are not compatible with!!”

Theodosia immediately lit a new match prepared to blow herself up if necessary.

Stiyl ignored it.

The two attacks clashed.

“You lost because you underestimated that one rune, Theodosia Electra!!”

There was a crimson explosion.

Two types of flames swirled together, converged, and then scattered out as a single explosion. Stiyl held his breath and covered his face with his clothes, but he still felt a burning pain in his nose and throat.

He looked around.

Theodosia was collapsed about 5 meters away.

After letting the match go, she must have gotten as far back as she could manage. Even so, she had either not been able to escape the blast or the shockwave had hit her.

Theodosia spoke from on the ground.

“…You are too strong. A normal magician would have panicked and shown an opening when I took the initiative with my defensive spells.”

“You lost because you created a strategy that relies on the weakness of your opponent. You should have found a strategy that used your own strengths rather than something you cannot rely on.”

“U-uuh… I may have been wrong from the instant I tried to take you on using Skírnir’s Staff and runes.”

“Hmph. Did you really think you could defeat an expert like me with rune skills you had hastily taught yourself?”

Stiyl swung his flame sword once and approached Theodosia.

He was heading forward to punish her for her betrayal.

“In the end, will you tell me about this traitor?”

“No, it’s best for you if you do not hear about it. This is my problem.”

She then continued.

“And don’t say sad things like “the end”. I’m going to make sure I live on for quite some time!!”

“Wha-!?”

Stiyl hurriedly started to swing down his flame sword, but a fine powder struck his face before he could.

“Theodosia!!”

He wiped off his face to regain his vision, but Theodosia was already gone.

The oddly extended space was also back to the original dark bank.

It seemed Theodosia’s spell had completely ceased functioning.

Stiyl rubbed the powder on his fingertips between his thumb and forefinger. His face turned bitter.

“The Drill of Rati…”

When Odin had stolen some special mead from the human world, he had used that drill to open a hole in a stone wall. It functioned as a charm that allowed one to sneak into difficult places and to escape from them.

(So she smashed it to a powdered form so she could carry it around with her… And she can also use it to make the person cornering her on the edge of death flinch. She’s practically turned it into a way to revive herself from the dead.)

At any rate, Theodosia Electra had escaped.

Stiyl angrily tossed aside his shortened cigarette and lit a new one.

(I’ll deal with her later. Right now, I need to find the true traitor.)

He jumped over the receptionist counter and headed deeper into the dark bank.

♦

He found it almost right away.

It was a small room that was likely used to store cleaning supplies. The entire bank was locked down and yet the door to that room was unlocked.

(So I’ve found it. Damn, just how confident in her spell was she?)

Theodosia had prepared a spiritual item that controlled the protection and release of treasure. Most likely, he would normally have been unable to enter that room. Unless he used the rune corresponding to the spell, the door and even the room itself would not exist. That would have been how it was set up.

That room was holy ground he would have been unable to break into.

Theodosia’s defeat had made that seal disappear.

(The traitor…)

Stiyl frowned as he stood before the door.

He recalled Theodosia's words.

"No, it's best for you if you do not hear about it. This is my problem."

(Who is this traitor and why did you help him or her?)

At the very least, he had to capture whoever it was.

If the person was dangerous, he would have no choice but to immediately execute him or her.

He checked on how many cards he had in his pocket and opened the door with his fairly sweaty hand.

And there he found the traitor that the Anglican Church had mentioned.

It was not a large man who was lying in wait for him and who looked used to fighting. Nor was it someone with a cunning-looking face who looked as if he could deal with any situation.

It was a small girl who looked to be around 12.

She was kneeling down in that small room. Near her, Theodosia was collapsed and breathing faintly. She had likely headed there to recover the traitor after using the Drill of Rati, but she had run out of strength.

The girl turned her gaze from Theodosia to Stiyl who had just entered the room.

As if he were tapping his palm against the wall, Stiyl stuck a rune card there and produced a flame sword.

The girl's eyes opened wide upon seeing the dazzling flame.

But the girl's reaction was nowhere near what Stiyl had expected.

She showed no sign of hostility and did not tremble in fear.

She opened her mouth and said, "Thank goodness. You're Theodosia's colleague, right!?"

Stiyl stopped where he was.

That girl was only half his height, but there was nothing but hope displayed on her face.

“Please. Theodosia told me to go on my own, but I don’t know who I can rely on. For now, I need to get to the police…no, to Anti-Skill! It seems the person who did this to Theodosia is still nearby!!”

Even though Stiyl had produced a sword of flames from his hand…

Even though he was clearly abnormal and was clearly dangerous…

That girl did not suspect him.

She understood that some kind of mysterious phenomenon was occurring before her eyes, but she did not even consider the possibility that it would bare its fangs toward her. It was possible that she was seeing Stiyl in the same way as some kind of fairy tale.

And yet if she just thought about it for a second, it should have been clear who had injured Theodosia.

“My phone’s battery is dead and I don’t want to just leave Theodosia here. What do I do? Why is she so beaten up…?”

And most importantly, her words held no hint of magic.

As someone who had been in that world for a long time, Stiyl could tell. He did not think that her use of normal words like “police” and “phone” were just a façade. She had the distinctive atmosphere of someone who had no knowledge of magic seeing something unnatural occur.

“…”

Stiyl felt his eyebrows move in doubt.

He truly started to wonder what was going on.

Was she the traitor?

(Or…)

Stiyl felt an unpleasant sweat on his back just before his cell phone started ringing.

He carried a number of different devices with him, but the phone ringing could only be accessed by the Anglican Church.

He put out his flame sword and answered the phone to find a Necessarius communications relay official.

“These are your orders. You must deal with the traitor who has entered Academy City,” said a female voice that was as cool as a machine.

He was receiving the real orders that Theodosia had warned him of.

“I will now read the mission description. The traitor’s name is Patricia Birdway. Gender: Female. Age: 12. Physical Characteristics:…”

He knew the details on Patricia’s appearance without being told.

They matched the girl before him.

“At school, she is the top of her class and she has been chosen to skip some grades. She has been invited as a guest researcher to many different agencies. She has been marked as a person of interest more due to her promising future than for her immediate battle ability.”

“…I have an idea who this Patricia is, but what does she have to do with us?”

“She is the younger sister of the boss of the Dawn-Colored Sunlight, a Golden-style magic cabal. Patricia herself has no connection to the Dawn-Colored Sunlight, but it has been made clear that a few members of the Dawn-Colored Sunlight have been stationed around her without her knowledge. Presumably, the objective is observation and protection.”

A magic cabal.

The Dawn-Colored Sunlight.

“As it has become possible that Patricia has value to the Dawn-Colored Sunlight for a reason beyond being a blood relative of its boss, we must quickly capture her and investigate this matter. If we can get some sort of result from this, we may be able to get a full understanding of the Dawn-Colored Sunlight as well as means of weakening or even destroying them. Your job is to capture Patricia.”

(The Dawn-Colored Sunlight, hm?)

Once, the world’s largest magic cabal had existed in the United Kingdom. Magicians who were simply too powerful had gathered in it and, as a result, its actual activities had ended in just a few years. After that, it had destroyed itself with infighting.

After its destruction, the fragments of the cabal had developed on their own, made progress, and still existed to that day while continuing to chaotically break apart. The cabals produced by that were known as Golden-style cabals.

The Dawn-Colored Sunlight was one of the most prominent magic cabals among those.

They were famous for accomplishing their goals by any means necessary and there were stories that left even pros speechless upon hearing the number of corpses created in the process of achieving their goals.

But that was all concerning the organization known as the Dawn-Colored Sunlight.

Was that girl really such an important person?

The communications official had said that the observation and protection were being carried out without Patricia herself knowing. In other words, the guards were not the girl's subordinates and she might not have been able to send them away even if she knew they were there. Also, the communications official had said that "Patricia herself has no connection to the Dawn-Colored Sunlight, but…" That just made things even more unclear.

If Patricia was a magician and a villain that had an important post within the Dawn-Colored Sunlight, there would have been no reason to start the sentence that way.

In order to get a better grasp of the situation, Stiyl asked a question to the Anglican communications official.

"…So why is she a traitor?"

"She refused to go along with the mission. She is a British citizen and yet she has denied something that would be to the United Kingdom's benefit. That makes her a traitor to her nation."

"!? You're telling me I'm supposed to capture her for just that? There's a possibility that Patricia still does not know about magic or the occult. Did you really think asking for her help was going to go well like that!? No girl is just going to go along with a complete stranger who says they want to look at her body and of course she would refuse if you tell her it's for the purpose of defeating a family member!!"

"But that is what it says in the mission description."

"Were the guards left by the Dawn-Colored Sunlight even all that strong? Patricia is alone now. If the entire group really saw her as valuable, they would have been guarding her more strictly. Don't you think what happened was more in line with guards put on her just because she's related to their boss!?"

"Any comments on a mission by an agent should be sent to the managing department."

"Were these orders really carefully examined? Read over this again. The contents of that document are not something I can just accept!! In fact, who gave approval for this mission!?"

"May I return to relaying the contents of your mission to you?"

"Don't just continue on according to the rules like that. This isn't a problem that can be dealt with just by following regulations!"

“Any comments on a mission by an agent should be sent to the managing department.”

Stiyl was dangerously close to cursing.

A traitor?

Stiyl realized more than he wished to why Theodosia had gone over to Patricia’s side.

“It seems reinforcements are entering Academy City now. We have received word that they wish to begin working right away. I believe they want to set a time and place for you to meet up, but…”

Stiyl hung up the phone as the communications official was one-sidedly making those arrangements.

He had completely missed the time and place.

(Dammit. I’m supposed to just hand this girl over to the Anglican Church? What do they plan to do with her in order to destroy a magic cabal?)

Patricia was anxiously looking up at him.

Most likely, she had not understood what he was talking about over the phone, but she had to have noticed that her name had come up.

“…”

Stiyl knew that the contents of the mission were rotten.

He was in Academy City, the headquarters of the science side. If a normal person who had no connection to magic were attacked and taken away in that city, the problem would exceed the realm of the Anglican Church and a magic cabal. It was even possible it could lead to a direct conflict between the magic side and the science side.

But the unit coming to assault Patricia Birdway would not listen even if he tried to convince them.

(What do I do…?)

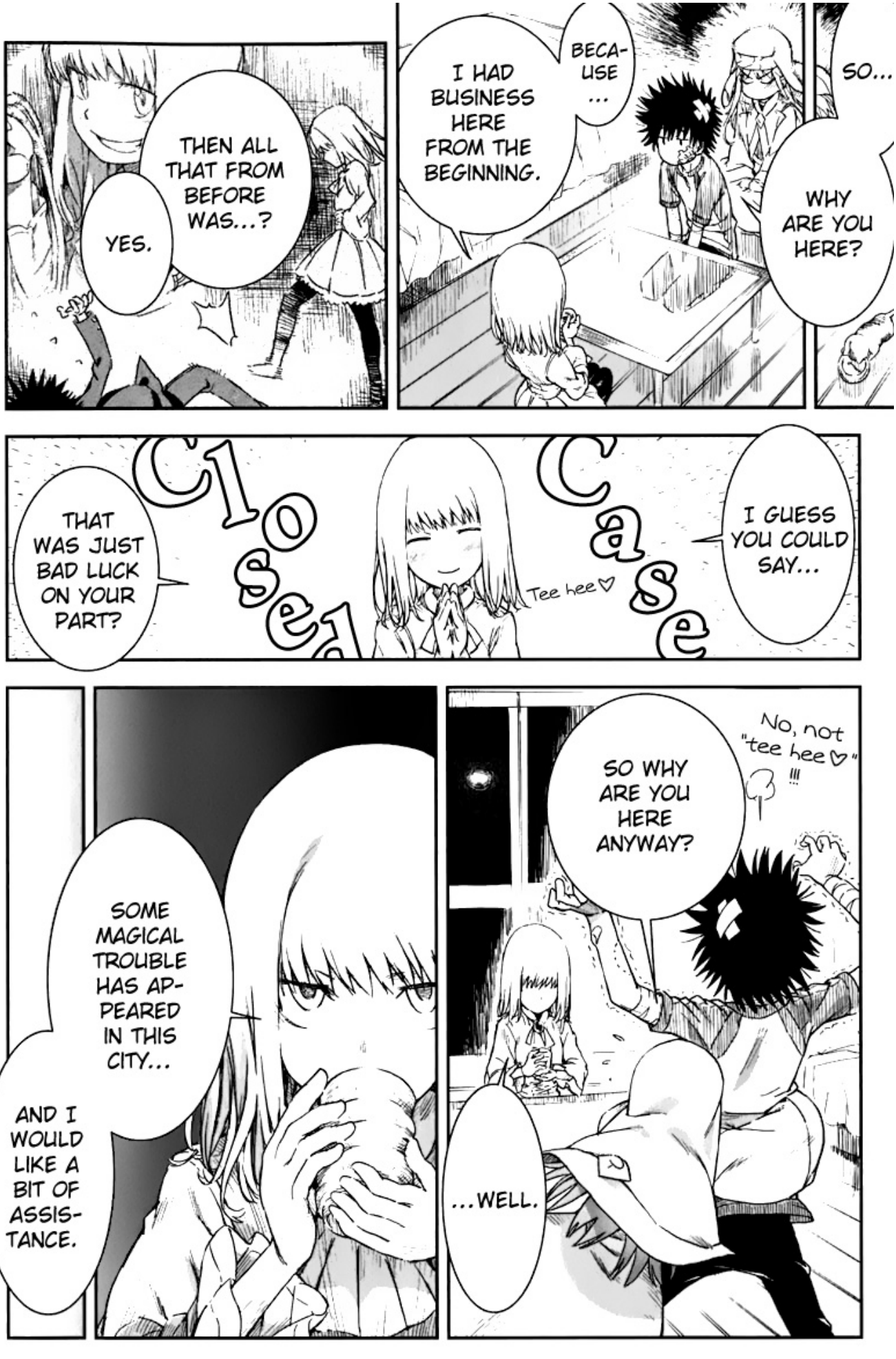
Stiyl looked back and forth between his cell phone and Patricia’s face.

(What am I supposed to do…!?)

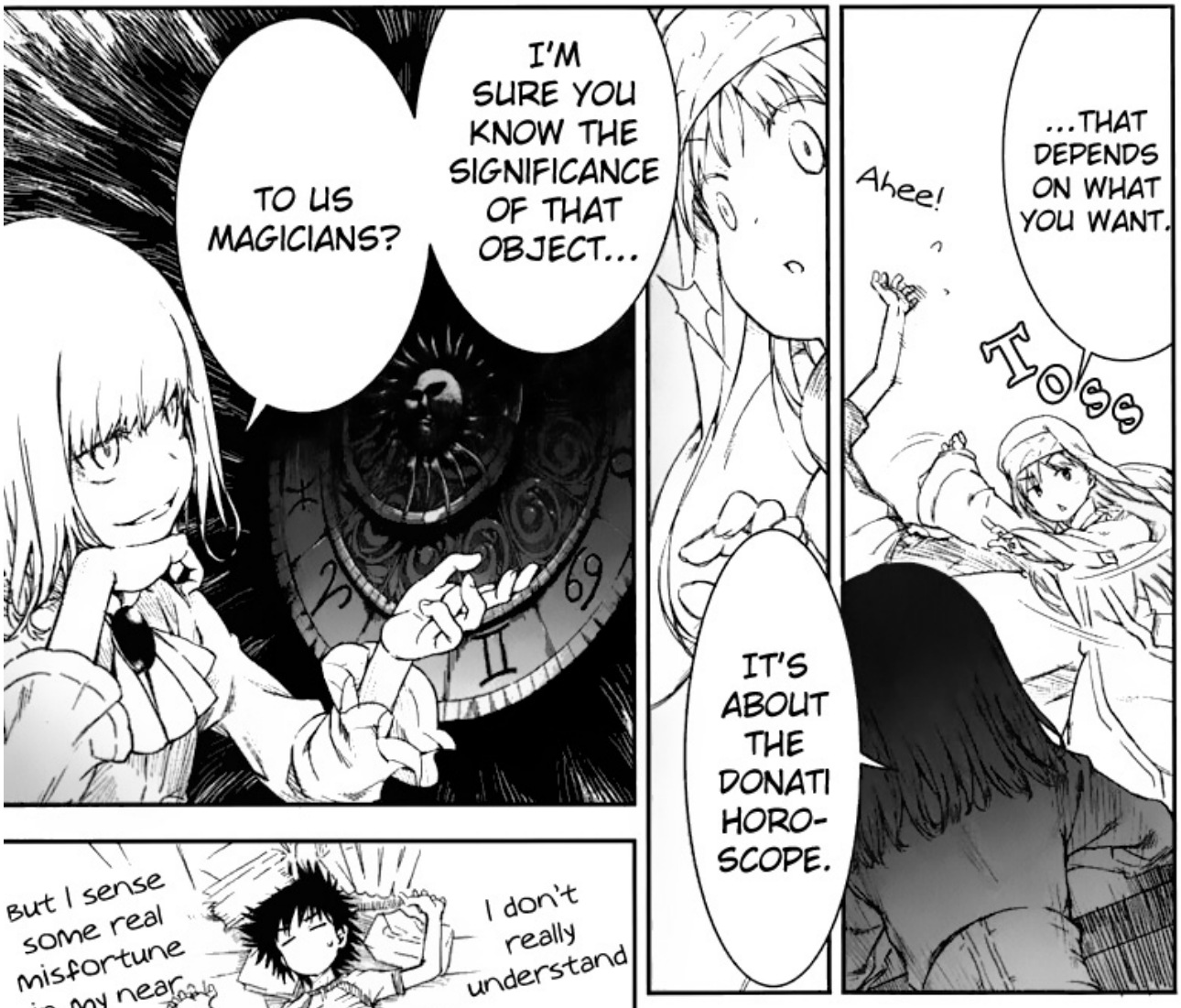
He noticed a slight smile on Theodosia’s lips.

She seemed to be saying that she had been troubled with the same problem.

TOUMA.
WHAT DID YOU DO THIS TIME ?
I CAN'T BELIEVE THAT WAS A PAINT BULLET...
Well, a lot happened ...
I'M STIFF AND IT'S DRIED ALL OVER ME.
EXPLAIN IT TO ME!
I'M GONNA TAKE A BATH.
What a horrible day...
Ah!
WAIT, TOUMA !
clatter
THE BATH-ROOM IS ....!!
WHAT
!!?


THEN ALL THAT FROM BEFORE WAS...?
YES.
I HAD BUSINESS HERE FROM THE BEGINNING.
BECA-USE ...
SO...
WHY ARE YOU HERE?
Closed Case
THAT WAS JUST BAD LUCK ON YOUR PART?
Tee hee♡
I GUESS YOU COULD SAY...
SOME MAGICAL TROUBLE HAS AP-PEARED IN THIS CITY...
AND I WOULD LIKE A BIT OF ASSIS-TANCE.
SO WHY ARE YOU HERE ANYWAY?
No, not "tee hee♡" !!!
...WELL.

ASSISTANCE FROM YOU, THE POSSESSOR OF THE WISDOM...
OF THE ANGLICAN CHURCH'S 0TH PARISH NECESSARIUS.
And from that hot headed idiot.


...THAT DEPENDS ON WHAT YOU WANT.
Ahee!
Toss
IT'S ABOUT THE DONATI HORO-SCOPE.
I'M SURE YOU KNOW THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THAT OBJECT...
TO US MAGICIANS?
I don't really understand
But I sense some real misfortune in my near future...

Part 3

At any rate, they could not stay there.

Stiyl carried Theodosia over his shoulders as she had not yet moved and then left the closed bank along with Patricia. If they stayed there, pursuers would come.

No matter how ridiculous the mission was, their opponents would come fully equipped as members of the Anglican Church's Necessarius as long as they recognized it as an official mission. They were at the disadvantage both in numbers and in equipment. It was quite likely that Stiyl alone would be unable to deal with it. Whether he was going to fight the pursuers or get the mission repealed, he would have to come up with a plan. And it took time to think up a strategy.

He was a member of the Anglican Church.

Of course, the normal course of action would be to cooperate with the pursuers and hand Patricia over.

But…

(How the hell am I supposed to go along with a mission like this? This is no longer just Patricia's problem. If I follow this rotten mission and screw up the next step, all of England could end up involved in the Dawn-Colored Sunlight's issue.)

Stiyl bit into his cigarette's filter.

(But what am I supposed to do against a nation? I'm just one magician!!)

He was conflicted, he was troubled, and he could not come up with an answer as he ran through the city at night along with Patricia.

"This will all be okay, right?" the girl asked with a worried voice.

Stiyl glanced over at her.

"Once we get Anti-Skill's help, there will be nothing to worry about, right?"

(Shit!!)

Even breathing the smoke deep into his lungs did not calm him down. Stiyl tossed the useless cigarette ahead and stomped on it as he ran.

The embers flowed backwards from the sole of his shoe.

And then…

“Where do you think you’re going?”

Suddenly, Stiyl heard an unnatural voice. Even though he was running as quickly as he could, the voice was at a constant but undetermined distance. Patricia must have been able to hear it as well because her shoulder’s jumped.

Stiyl frowned.

At the very right edge of his vision, he glimpsed a black figure.

“Your destination does not lie in that direction.”

“Eh?”

With a puzzled look on her face, Patricia turned in the direction of the voice.

“*Don’t focus on it*!!” Stiyl yelled out, but it was already too late.

A sound similar to glass shattering came from Patricia’s chest.

All strength left her body, she lost her balance, and she collapsed forward without stopping her momentum from running.

“I was too slow!!”

Stiyl came to a quick stop and approached Patricia. She was completely unconscious and she did not respond even when he slapped her on the cheek. The black figure had disappeared from the edge of his vision. Stiyl’s expression turned bitter as he confirmed that it had been a type of spell.

With Theodosia already on one shoulder, he put Patricia’s small form on his other shoulder and tried to start running once more.

“Kh.”

But that was simply too much of a burden. It would be difficult to continue moving.

He needed to temporarily hide somewhere.

Stiyl peered inside a nearby alley and then headed inside it.

(Treating Patricia comes first.)

The alley surface was dirty, but it was not time to be picky.

Stiyl put down the two and then pulled a cigarette from the box using his mouth.

He lit the tip and then checked on Patricia's condition.

Quite a bit of sweat had appeared on her face as she lay limply on the ground. Stiyl used a finger to lift up one of her eyelids and then ran his index finger across her forehead.

When Patricia did not move even slightly, Stiyl looked away and clicked his tongue.

(Mental interference. If *her consciousness had been destroyed* there would be nothing I could do, but this isn't that serious. Only one portion of her mind is being forcibly held in place which is preventing the whole thing from moving.)

If you thought of the human mind as being made up of many gears, the magic user had forced a wedge between two of the gears to stop them all from moving. That failure in one spot was having an effect on the whole, so Patricia's mind had been stopped.

In that case, what he had to do was simple.

Just by removing that one wedge, the gears would regain their normal motion.

(But removing this spell is a bit much for me alone. I'd like some backup for this.)

If the girl known as Index who had memorized 103,000 grimoires was there, things would have been perfect in more ways than one, but that was hoping for too much.

(In that case…)

Stiyl glanced to the side.

Theodosia was limply lying there.

"Hnn!!"

Stiyl stomped on the center of Theodosia's stomach as she lay unconscious on the ground.

"Gbah!?"

Theodosia awoke with that ridiculous noise.

"Ubh!? Y-yes!? Good morning, Stiyl!!"

"…Now I'm not sure I can trust you to support me with this…"

"C'mon! Is that anything to say to someone who you just forced awake!?"

He forced a cigarette into Theodosia's mouth to calm her down a bit.

They had to return Patricia to normal and get out of there before any pursuers arrived.

"Just to check. Did you know about all of this from the beginning, Theodosia?"

"Ha ha!! Being the person that knows everything makes me sound like an intellectual final boss, doesn't it?"

Stiyl grabbed the cigarette and shook it slightly to drop some ashes down.

"Hot!? Hot!!?"

"Then tell me from the beginning!! Don't keep it to yourself and act all pleased with yourself!!"

"Sorry! But…hot! I didn't think it was right to get people involved in this kind of thing, so…hooottt!?"

"Shut up. First, we need to do something about Patricia. Just get up and help me already."

Stiyl brushed up his long bangs that were getting in his face and then began the preparations.

First, he cast aside the old cigarette, pulled a new one out of the box, and lit it with one of Theodosia's matches.

Next, he blew some of the cigarette smoke on a few rune cards before placing one on Patricia's forehead, chest, and stomach.

"I see. In both Eastern and Western magic, the cigarette is used as a spiritual item that carries out changes of mental states, so you are using that as a base to investigate Patricia's mind."

"If I had some alcohol too, it would be perfect, but I don't think we have time to get some."

Magic could be carried out by materials gathered at a convenience store. Some legendary item hidden within ancient ruins was not necessarily needed. Of course, there were spells that needed items like that, but they were not using magic of that level.

"Let's go."

"Okay."

Stiyl adjusted his grip on the cigarette and Theodosia lightly swung the match that had lit it.

By using the fire and the smoke as a common item, the three of them were bound magically.

"I A T W C P H I S K W O T D O T H. (This hand connects to a wavering heart and acts as the key to open that door.)"

When Stiyl closed his eyes and chanted that, the flames of the cigarette and the match *became fixed in place*. The flames were clearly burning, but the match showed no sign of shortening. The same thing happened with the cigarette.

Stiyl slowly opened his eyes.

His eyes were already out of focus and there was no change to his expression.

"…This makes me want to draw things on your face," said Theodosia, but Stiyl gave no response.

It seemed as if he would fall over from just a slight poke. It seemed like a miracle that the cigarette was still in the corner of this mouth.

"Ow…"

Theodosia frowned slightly and looked over her body.

On her arms and legs, she had a few light burns that would not leave scars from the battle in the bank, but the dull pain from her chest to her navel was much worse. She guessed it must have been from the shockwaves.

"…"

Theodosia ignored her various pains, waved the lit match, and continued focusing.

The spell Stiyl was carrying out was a delicate one. Not to mention that he was not well versed in healing methods for anything besides burns. Without Theodosia's support, he would end up having his own mind broken along with Patricia's.

However, Stiyl was not currently inside Patricia's mind.

Only specialists could do something of that high level.

Rather than slicing open a patient's stomach to look inside, he was only pricking into the stomach's surface to find out what the disease was.

Basically, he was using the smoke to touch Patricia's skin, analyzing the inside of her mind, and reproducing its condition within his own brain. To put it simply, it was an extreme game of make-believe. It might have been similar to an actor getting into character. By approaching the same state as Patricia, he could learn what part of her mind was affected.

It may have sounded like a rather unique method, but it was actually rather popular in the magic business. People such as Crowley could "get into character" at such a high level that they could manipulate the model person and make them trip. It could be called a reversal of Idolatry Theory.

"…"

An intense stabbing pain ran across Stiyl's head.

It was on the left side of his head just above the ear.

"So it's there…"

Stiyl *once more opened his eyes*. With a bursting sound, the flames on the cigarette and the match both disappeared. Stiyl stabbed the now flameless cigarette into the side of Patricia's head.

The soft cigarette was easily crushed.

Even so, a hard grinding sound came from Patricia's head.

"It's removed!! Theodosia, restrain her!!"

Her small form jumped up two or three times.

Theodosia forcibly restrained her and then Patricia's eyes opened and her pupils widened to their limit. Stiyl helped grab the girl's arms and legs as well and her eyes finally returned to normal.

♦

Now that Patricia and Theodosia were both able to walk on their own, Stiyl's burden had been lightened by quite a bit. For the moment, they continued down the dark alleyway.

The mental spell that had attacked Patricia had been a wide range but low power attack. Stiyl doubted the black figure he had seen was the true attack spell. It had likely only been used to slow them down so the magician could get closer.

In other words, their pursuer was not yet nearby.

“What are you planning to do from now on, Theodosia? If you went this far without any real chance of success, I really will roast you.”

“Eh heh heh. Patricia has no connection to magic, so there should be no problem with having Academy City shelter her as long as they don’t try to develop any psychic powers in her. It isn’t anything as definitive as having them take her in as a refugee, but handing her over should take top priority.”

“…So what are we going to do?”

“Hide until the heat dies down?”

Stiyl kicked Theodosia in the back. He then sighed while wishing he hadn’t gotten involved with something related to that woman.

“Patricia, why are you in Japan?”

“At first, I came here on a trip with my sister, but we got separated partway through. Then Theodosia appeared and we decided to go to Academy City so I could meet up with my sister.”

At that point, Theodosia would have had received her mission from the Anglican Church, but she must not have told Patricia about that part. She might have gotten separated from her older sister due to some kind of magical battle being carried out below the surface. Currently, the guards who should have been by Patricia’s side were not there.

“If only all this hadn’t happened,” Patricia muttered with a sad look on her face. “I had been interested in Japan’s Academy City for a while. In fact, I had wanted to study here if I could. But *my sister and the others* did not approve of that, so I had to rethink everything.”

Stiyl understood why they had not let her.

The Dawn-Colored Sunlight was one of the leading magic cabals in the United Kingdom. Patricia may have no direct connections with the cabal, but she would still end up taking part in the psychic powers development Curriculum if she were to become a student in Academy City. If she became a scientific esper, a political problem would appear between magic and science.

“I don’t know why, but my sister and the others seem to hate Academy City. I was thinking this trip could change their impression of it, but then all this happened…”

Patricia did not know of the complex details of the situation, so she was being saddened by something she was completely wrong about.

Stiyl blew out some cigarette smoke and changed the subject.

“The Dawn-Colored Sunlight, hm?”

“That’s the club or whatever that my sister is in. Is it really that famous?”

Patricia’s description made it clear she did not even know what a magic cabal was and Stiyl put a hand to his forehead.

“It’s very famous indeed.”

(…But what is the person who submitted this mission trying to do by having us interfere with such a major cabal? For generations, the bosses of the Dawn-Colored Sunlight have been known to be ruthless and wise and they have given us our fair share of bitter experiences. Is the church this desperate to find an opening through which to destroy the Dawn-Colored Sunlight?)

He just could not figure out what the person behind the mission was after.

And he could not exactly discuss it in front of Patricia.

(Or is the goal in the mission given to me a dummy and there is some other reason behind this? If Patricia herself really has that much value, then what is it that gives her that value?)

The cigarette at the edge of Stiyl’s mouth moved up and down as he turned in Patricia’s direction.

“Did you hear anything from your sister? Or were you given anything?”

“Eh?”

Patricia looked puzzled at first, but…

“How did you know?”

(Bingo.)

Without showing it on his face, Stiyl increased his earnestness within.

Patricia stuck her hand in her pocket and fished around for something.

“Before I got separated from my sister, she told me to take this, but-…huh?”

“I have it here,” Theodosia said with a smile as she held out a small box.

“Eh!? Eh!?”

Stiyl ignored Patricia's genuine surprise and used his ring-covered fist to punch his kleptomaniac colleague.

"But it was dangerous to just have Patricia keep i-…gyaaahhh!?" Theodosia explained as she fell to the ground.

During all that, the box had been tossed up into the air and Stiyl caught it with one hand.

It was about the size of two matchboxes. It was an iron treasure box with a keyhole in it. The box itself had elaborate decorations making it look a bit like a music box.

"Where's the key?"

"O-over here…gbh."

Stiyl took the key that Theodosia had weakly tossed his way, stuck it in the keyhole, and turned it. With a slight click, the box easily unlocked.

When it did, Patricia's eyes opened wide.

"Hehh…So it really does open."

"What?"

"Oh, um, I tried a bunch of times, but it would never open. I thought the inside of the keyhole had rusted or something. Pouring oil in didn't help and I was thinking of looking inside with a fiberscope if I got the chance…Eh? You opened it too, Theodosia? Amazing."

"…"

Stiyl looked puzzled as he looked at Patricia who was looking in Theodosia's direction.

The box may have been set up so Patricia could not touch the contents.

(If so, why did the Dawn-Colored Sunlight give her the box? It also bothers me that Theodosia and I could open it so easily. From a security standpoint, the complete reverse would be normal.)

And if the Dawn-Colored Sunlight wanted to distance Patricia from the world of magic, they would not have given her the box to begin with.

Stiyl recalled that the mission description had said that Patricia had value to the entire organization of the Dawn-Colored Sunlight.

(No, the odds of Patricia being a magician are zero. It's hard to believe she would have faked receiving that mental attack. There was no guarantee Theodosia or I would have the recovery spell needed, so there would be too much of a risk in faking it. Also, there would be no point in holding us up while we're fleeing from the pursuers.)

In that case, why had they given that treasure box to a harmless girl?

And why was the church after her?

There were a lot of things he could not figure out on the church's side and on the cabal's side.

The clue to figuring that out lay in his hand.

"…"

Stiyl slowly opened the unlocked treasure box.

What he found inside was a small gray stone about 2 cm across.

Like a jewelry case for a ring, the inside was covered in soft red cloth.

There were runes on the surface. No, technically it was a portion of a string of runes. In other words, he could not tell what it was supposed to mean with just that.

Stiyl felt along the surface of the stone with a fingertip and then frowned.

"An epitaph?"

Even then, rune data like that was carelessly being erected in places like Sweden. Such things could be called the world's most generally neglected grimoires. No matter how hard a normal person worked, they would never be able to reach a stone monument with an Original level epitaph that held great power. That was just how they were made.

Theodosia got up from the ground and said, "That was discovered in Alaska."

"I thought rune slates were primarily from the plains of Scandinavia?"

"*Yes, and you know what that means.*"

"…I see. So it's an undiscovered derived branch of runes."

There was not just one type of runes.

Just like most languages, they changed day by day depending on the era or the location. The standard number of runes was 24, but some sets used 16 and some places used 33.

Of course, the effects of rune magic changed depending on the type of runes being used.

Few records mentioned runes being used in Alaska. If there was a distinctive deviation in the runes, previously unusable magic could be activated. It was essentially the same as having a completely new set of spells different from those of normal rune magic.

“So this is a portion of an epitaph explaining the Alaskan runes?”

“Indeed. Rune epitaphs are carelessly neglected out in the middle of plains, so they are daily worn away by the effects of things such as acid rain. However, with an Original…”

“A true grimoire will not disappear naturally.”

An Original had the power to not be destroyed no matter what method was used. And even if it was destroyed, it could restore itself as many times as necessary. If there truly was an epitaph of the Alaskan runes, then it was odd for the small stone to still be broken off like that. It was strange that it had not been restored.

The one holding the key to that was likely that fragment of the epitaph.

It had to have been magically affected so that its restoration speed was slowed or made the restoration function spin its wheels fruitlessly. Instead of being absolutely destroyed, it had been intentionally sealed.

“So basically this is the most important piece needed to put together an Original grimoire?”

That was a rune epitaph that indicated an unknown new set of runes.

The maintenance of the seal and the release of the seal were both reliant on that stone.

“This certainly is a major issue befitting of the Dawn-Colored Sunlight. I take it the church’s pursuers are trying to seize this fragment rather than destroy the cabal.”

“Yes,” Theodosia clapped her hands together. “But the fragmentary data needed to decode the Alaskan runes are already gathered within the Index Librorum Prohibitorum. They are working on it even now in London, but at the current rate, it seems it will take a few more years before they find even a single clue. It is not something that the entire country is going all out to acquire.”

“…I see. So a group in Necessarius wants this information without using Index.”

Stiyl smiled.

If the data on the Alaskan runes was truly needed for a national policy, they could just send out a formal notice and have the Index Librorum Prohibitorum join in. Since they had not done that, it seemed their pursuers were not connected to the nation as a whole.

“The Alaskan runes are incredibly valuable, but we will acquire them eventually without this. In that case, I doubt this is connected to danger to England as a whole. Someone must have set up this mission.”

(What was all that “traitor” crap?)

The girl before his eyes had indeed done nothing wrong.

He did not know what the Dawn-Colored Sunlight was planning or what the commander in Necessarius who had submitted the mission was trying to do, but at the very least, Patricia Birdway was not related to it.

It must have shown up on his face because Patricia looked puzzled and Theodosia’s expression softened.

“But that fragment of the epitaph is not enough to acquire the Alaskan Runes.”

“Yes, if it was, the Dawn-Colored Sunlight would have begun the ceremony right away.”

But Stiyl felt it would be best to try to contact the Anglican Church. There were a lot of unclear aspects to the relation between Necessarius and the Dawn-Colored Sunlight concerning the Alaskan runes. Stiyl thought of a few colleagues he felt were absolutely safe and decided to have them investigate it.

But then…

“You made me go to some trouble, but it seems you have finally captured the traitor for me,” said a sudden voice from behind them.

The three of them turned around. As they did, Stiyl placed a rune card on the narrow alley wall and Theodosia pulled a few matches out of her small matchbox.

The new figure was over 10 meters away.

He was a man wearing a black coat and looked about 20. He was about the same height as Stiyl and was white just like Stiyl. A Western sword was hanging casually down from his hand.

Stiyl blew out some cigarette smoke and frowned.

“I take it you don’t plan on naming yourself because I’m a colleague?”

“I’m not so sure you think of me as your colleague.”

With a single hand, Stiyl snapped shut the lid to the treasure box with the epitaph fragment inside.

The man clearly reacted to that.

“If you want it, you’ll have to kill me first.”

“Your ashes will scatter magnificently.”

With those words, the man’s sword became surrounded in roaring flames.

A few runes were shining on the surface of the blade.

Carved into the blade were sowulo, gebo, kenaz, ansuz, laguz, and uruz.

Reading down the first letters spelled sgkalu. It meant something along the lines of “the torch that acquired the sun using magic”.

“First Theodosia and now you. Norse weapons seem to be popular. Well, I suppose I have no right to complain…flames and swords are quite compatible.”

“Sorry, but this isn’t a sword. *It’s a twig*.”

“A twig?”

“It isn’t anything too rare. It’s the most famous twig in Norse mythology. It is the twig of the greatest flames that is said to set fire to the trunk of the World Tree and burn everything away.”

“You don’t mean…”

“Yes, it is Lævateinn.”

The man casually swung his sword.

Flames spiraled up with a roar.

The crimson glow spread to the narrow alleyway in a flash. The asphalt ground, the concrete walls, and everything else were covered in flames in no time at all.

“Convenient, isn’t it? I would say it’s one of the easiest to use spiritual items in the United Kingdom.”

(Wha-…?)

Stiyl’s eyes opened wide.

His flame sword exceeded 3,000 degrees Celsius. It was not difficult for him to destroy stone and rocks. However, the Lævateinn that man used was producing a phenomenon that could not be explained with mere firepower.

The asphalt and the concrete were burning.

The materials themselves were burning into ashes as if they were thin Japanese paper.

With a low noise, the flames travelled across the ground and the walls heading straight for Stiyl and the others.

“Tch. G A S T T H. T F I A S T R I C! (Bring the flames to my hand. Its form is the sword and its role is execution!)”

Stiyl frantically produced a flame sword and tried to make it explode in an attempt to hold back the other flames using the blast.

But before he could, his flame sword *became wrapped in the new flames*.

His sword should have been made of flames, but it was burned away by flames.

In no time at all, it was burned down to the base…and approached Stiyl’s hand.

“Ohhh!!”

Stiyl frantically put out the flame sword and stepped back.

Then, Theodosia flew a lit match.

A large explosion occurred.

However, the blast was destroyed by the other flame as if it were being eaten into.

It was like a thin plastic film being scorched from the inside by fire.

That only gained them a few seconds.

“Hurry! Run!!” yelled Theodosia.

She used a spell that ruled over the protection and release of treasure. She surely would have had plenty of spells prepared with which she could protect Patricia, but she did not try to use any of them. She had likely instinctually realized that she could not protect against the flame of Lævateinn.

“And where do you think you can hide?” asked the man in a whisper from the other side of the Theodosia’s flames that were easily being eaten away.

(He’ll catch us if we just run away…!!)

Stiyl clicked his tongue and pulled a rune card out of his pocket.

The man gently shook his head.

“A smokescreen won’t do you any good.”

“Is that so? Let’s try it anyway.”

Stiyl put on a fake smile and detonated his flame sword in the direction of the man.

♦

The man’s Lævateinn burned through their tiny bit of resistance.

Beyond the flames, he saw his targets’ fleeing backs.

But their movements were so standardized that it irritated the man.

“Hmm…”

He cautiously focused and spotted another presence in a different place. Their movements had just seemed too precise. When their life was in danger, people could not flee with such a calm rhythm.

Which meant…

“That’s a fake. What an honest man. He actually took me up on my challenge.”

(But…)

With an explosive noise, he fired some flames and blew away the figures fleeing in front of him.

The attack left no corpses and no ashes.

It had truly been an illusion. The figures had easily disappeared into thin air.

The man’s smile deepened and he recalled the design on the card Stiyl had pulled out just before. The man calculated out what the construction of Stiyl’s spell must have been given his actions and his spiritual item.

The man quickly figured out where they were.

“The magic power used to create that illusion is leaking out. How sweet of you to leave footsteps behind as you flee.”

The man then ran through the dark alley with Lævateinn hanging down.

His targets were not far away.

♦

Stiyl Magnus heard the man's words from close by.

On one side of the empty alleyway was a backdoor standing ever so slightly open.

The iron door creaked slightly. The three who had run off were standing within.

"…He's gone."

Stiyl had a spell that hid his own body by creating a magical mirage.

But he had been unsure if that would be enough to trick that man. There was a danger of the man determining his location by detecting the origin of the magic power.

That was why Stiyl had prepared three levels of dummies.

The first was the mirage illusion of them fleeing within the back alley.

The second was the artificial presence of someone who had not actually been there.

And the third was activating it all such that the origin magic power that activated the spell was disguised.

"Ugh….That was nerve-racking," said Theodosia quietly while she trembled in an unnatural posture.

Patricia stuck her head out of the door and looked off in the direction the man had headed.

She looked puzzled and asked, "Um, what is going on…?"

That question brought a bitter expression to Stiyl's face. He himself wanted to ask some questions about that Lævateinn and he did not have time to explain about spells from the very beginning.

However, it seemed Patricia did not notice what Stiyl was thinking.

"But that was amazing. That looked like normal concrete, but it was actually some easily burnable material. I guess that way they don't have to put pressure on the disposal facilities when they destroy a building."

"…That *was* normal concrete. Lævateinn is what was amazing," Stiyl carelessly responded to Patricia's misplaced admiration.

"Eh?" Patricia's expression made it clearly she still did not understand what was going on. "By the way, where did that guy head off to looking so confident?"

Stiyl headed back out into the alleyway.

"I temporarily transferred some magic power to a rune and activated the spell using that. I put the card I used as a relay point on a mouse's back."

"Um…?"

"In other words, he's chasing after a dummy."

When Stiyl said that, Patricia's expression brightened as if a light bulb had appeared next to her head.

"Is it something like going in through a foreign server in order to prevent being traced?"

"…Maybe. I don't really understand examples from that side of things."

Stiyl was impressed at how calm she was given the situation and he checked to make sure the man was truly gone from the area.

"He'll figure it out soon. We need to get away from here"

The three of them nodded and ran off in the opposite direction of the man with Lævateinn.

As they ran, Theodosia said, "Wh-what do we do now? Even if we lost him for now, we still have not resolved the real issue here."

"True. This kind of trick will not work a second time. There is no guarantee we will be able to get away the next time we're found."

Patricia's expression turned fearful hearing that.

"I want an opportunity to turn this around, but what was with that spiritual item!? He said it was Lævateinn, but that's one of the strongest weapons in Norse mythology! It's on the same level as Gungnir!" said Theodosia.

"There are two theories about it. One says it's the sword held by the fire giant Surtr and the other says it's the sword kept with Surtr's wife. It seems this is a mix of the two, but it can't be the real thing. It's the same as your matches and Skírnir's staff. It's just a spiritual item with the same name."

That meant it really was just a magical spiritual item created by carving runes into a normal sword.

But that was not enough to explain it.

Stiyl was quite knowledgeable of rune magic. That was why he knew that just carving runes like kenaz was not enough to produce such a great effect.

If they knew how it worked, they could perhaps find a way of defeating it, but…

"!?"

Suddenly, a deep red light appeared behind Stiyl and the others.

It was the flame of Lævateinn.

"Fuck that was fast!!"

The man must have seen through the trick Stiyl had set up. He was still far away, but he would catch up before long. He was not an opponent they could escape on foot and a trick like before would not work again.

Stiyl and Theodosia's gazes met after they saw Patricia's pale face.

"Let's split into two groups."

Stiyl grabbed Patricia's hand and used his other hand to give Theodosia the treasure box with the rune stone in it.

"For some reason, he did not just kill Patricia and take the fragment of the epitaph. She should be a much easier target than us, but he ignored her. And I doubt he's just overflowing with chivalry." Stiyl blew out cigarette smoke in annoyance. "Most likely, he needs Patricia alive in addition to the rune epitaph. That's why we need to split up the things he sees as high priority."

"I have some general information regarding that…but I'll explain it all later! Check this! I have also added information on a rendezvous point to the end!!"

Theodosia tossed her matchbox to Stiyl and disappeared down one side of a fork in the alley.

(So there's a report inside an illusion in the fire…)

Stiyl rolled the matchbox around in his hand and ran down the other side of the fork with Patricia.

The alleyway was short. They exited onto a large road before long.

As they ran, Stiyl lit a match to get Theodosia's information.

The information shown in the flames was as follows.

…By using the fragment of the rune epitaph, the stone monument containing the undiscovered branch of runes can be completely restored.

…But the movements of a special heavenly body called Donati's Comet are needed for the restoration spell.

…To check the rules of its motion, a horoscope from when the comet last arrived is needed.

…The sole existing horoscope is currently in Academy City. (See a different match for details.)

"It's here…?" Stiyl muttered.

According to Theodosia's information, Academy City had discovered and retrieved the horoscope purely as a scientific item. Currently, it was becoming a slight issue between the science side and the magic side.

And as for the reason Patricia was being targeted…

…A special magical seal has been put on the fragment of the rune epitaph.

…The Dawn-Colored Sunlight applied the seal.

…The seal can only be removed by the boss of the Dawn-Colored Sunlight or one of her blood relatives.

…Unless the seal is removed, the epitaph cannot be restored.

That seemed to be the situation.

Excluding special exceptions such as Saints, the use of magic had nothing to do with genetic characteristics. However, some magicians did create spells that used the information from blood as a key. This was one of those locks.

It all fit perfectly with what the Lævateinn man seemed to be after.

Stiyl still was not sure what the Dawn-Colored Sunlight was after by giving the fragment of the epitaph to Patricia, but he at least knew what the Lævateinn man was after.

"Wh-what do we do!? Do you know where the nearest Anti-Skill station is!?"

"How will going there help us!? They can't stand up to that man!!"

Patricia appeared to be suffering as she ran along next to Stiyl. She was a girl of around 12 who had not received any kind of training. She would not be able to run for long.

“Then what are we going to do? Can we…can we really get away from that man!? Before, you said just running wasn’t enough…”

“I’ll deal with this somehow. I have no other choice!”

Stiyl gritted his teeth at the fact that he could not give a real answer.

Unless he could figure out how the Lævateinn spiritual item worked, he would just be burned away if he faced that man head on.

The man’s flames were likely greater than Stiyl’s.

It pained him to admit it, but he had no way of winning in a straight fight.

He would be killed if he could not think up with to deal with the man, but he did not have time to think. In order to buy some time, he could…

“…The horoscope.”

“Eh?”

“That’s the final part that man wants so badly. If we can get it before he can, we can use it to stop him! I have enough information that I can find a way to defeat that Lævateinn as long as I have time to think calmly about it!!”

That same theory could be used with Patricia as the means of getting in the man’s way rather than the horoscope, but…

(No…)

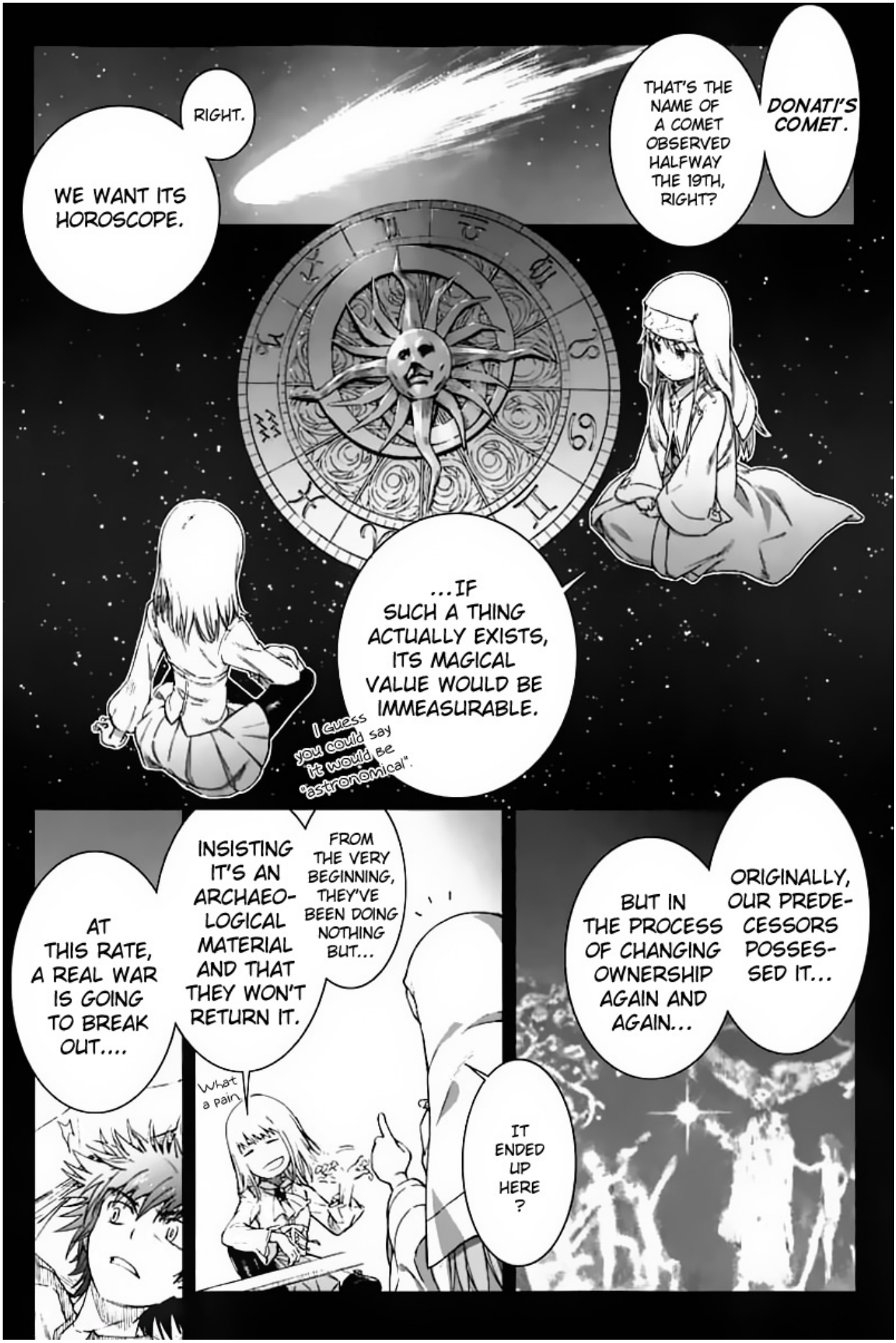
Stiyl quickly shook away that slight temptation.

(In the worst case, he can still use a different blood relative to gain the Alaskan rune epitaph even if Patricia dies. On the other hand, the horoscope is currently unique. It’s clear which one will be more effective as a shield!!)

He decided to go with that reasoning.

He knew he was being soft.

Most likely, if Stiyl Magnus yielded there, he would end up truly giving in.


DONATI'S COMET.
THAT'S THE NAME OF A COMET OBSERVED HALFWAY THE 19TH, RIGHT?
RIGHT.
WE WANT ITS HOROSCOPE.
...IF SUCH A THING ACTUALLY EXISTS, ITS MAGICAL VALUE WOULD BE IMMEASURABLE.
I guess you could say it would be "astronomical".
ORIGINALLY, OUR PREDE-CESSORS POSSES-SED IT...
BUT IN THE PROCESS OF CHANGING OWNERSHIP AGAIN AND AGAIN...
IT ENDED UP HERE ?
FROM THE VERY BEGINNING, THEY'VE BEEN DOING NOTHING BUT...
INSISTING IT'S AN ARCHAEO-LOGICAL MATERIAL AND THAT THEY WON'T RETURN IT.
What a pain.
AT THIS RATE, A REAL WAR IS GOING TO BREAK OUT....

BEFORE THAT HAPPENS ...
WE NEED TO ...
BOOM
...Isn't this going too far?
RECOVER THE HOROSCOPE.
Screech
Screeech
Screeeech
... THERE'S NOTHING HERE.
Where's the driver?
It seems he has fled.
... INDEED.
Flash
BOOM

GET AWAY FROM THE WE-WOLF
YOU TWO!
Oh, shit
ANTI SKILL ?!
WERE WE SET UP!?
DAMMIT !!!
R-un !!
Dash!
THIS IS BAD.
IF SOMEONE IS MONITO-RING OUR ACTIONS...
...THEN INDEX IS IN DANGER, TOO !!!

Part 4

The horoscope.

Stiyl Magnus gritted his teeth as he ran through Academy City dragging Patricia Birdway along by her small arm.

The Lævateinn man was after the complete recovery of the Alaskan rune epitaph and the acquisition of its knowledge. To achieve that, he needed the epitaph fragment Stiyl had given Theodosia Electra, Patricia Birdway, and the horoscope that could be used to calculate the magical effects of Donati's Comet which only approached the earth after a period of longer than 2000 years.

The lack of any one of those things was fatal to the Lævateinn man's plan.

They would work well as shields.

However, the epitaph fragment was a portion of an Original grimoire, so it could not be destroyed by human means and using Patricia's life as a shield was out of the question, so that left only one option. Stiyl had no choice but to steal the horoscope that was being transported by Academy City. If he managed that before the Lævateinn man could do so, he could come up with a plan using it as bait.

"Pant, pant… H-how much farther are we going to run?" asked Patricia.

Stiyl was almost twice her height. Running such a long distance must have been tough for someone as young as Patricia. As he was going to have to fight the Lævateinn man, he wanted to find a safe place to let her evacuate to, but…

(Where is there a safe place? If I have an Academy City facility look after her, he'll just burn away the building and anyone guarding her!!)

"We're almost there. There's a nature park up ahead."

According to the information inside the flame of the matches Theodosia had given Stiyl, the transport vehicle was scheduled to pass through there on its way to an archaeology facility. As the term "nature park" suggested, it was an area filled with mostly trees.

As he headed for that destination, Stiyl heard his cell phone ringing.

It was from the Anglican communications official.

"Stiyl Magnus. As per your request, I will now reveal to you the information uncovered in the investigation."

"…What are you talking about?"

“You requested to be told who signed their approval of the mission unfolding within Academy City related to capturing Patricia. Would you like to hear the recording of your request?”

Patricia had no idea what was being said, so she just stared blankly, but Stiyl smiled bitterly.

It was true that he had mentioned something along those lines after defeating Theodosia, but he had not expected such a straightforward response. It seemed the communications official was simply doing what she was told unrelated to issues of ally or enemy.

“It took some time to look over the Necessarius rankings to see if you had the right to this information. I apologize it took so long to reply to your request,” apologized the official as if she were simply reading from a script. “The individual who signed approval of the mission was Richard Brave. Just like you, he belongs to the Anglican Church’s 0th Parish, Necessarius. His primary area of activity is North America. His achievements lie in setting up a defensive line along the Atlantic Ocean in order to prevent American magic cabals from invading England.”

“…”

“He primarily uses Norse spells and seems to be strong with fire-related spells. He has put together mobile sea battle strategies that use the techniques of the Vikings that ruled the Atlantic in their golden age and who discovered North America even before Columbus. …Was this helpful?”

“I see.”

The edges of Stiyl’s mouth twisted up in a smile.

Of course, he had not gained any information on what the man’s weak point may be. But…

“It’s nice to know the name of the man I’m about to kill.”

Before the official could give any kind of stereotypical protest, Stiyl switched off his cell phone. Patricia was out of breath due to all the running, but she still looked over at him with fear in her eyes.

Stiyl made no attempt to respond to her.

Most likely, Patricia’s pacifism was right in a moral sense. However, organizations like Necessarius had been created in the first place because that was not enough to deal with everything. Patricia’s feelings would not cut it in the current situation.

The park then came into view.

Either for mental health reasons or in order to eliminate carbon dioxide, an area filled with green stood there in the middle of Academy City's usual concrete and asphalt. However, just as a forest seemed pitch black at night, the area before Stiyl and Patricia looked like a sea of darkness.

The sparse light from streetlights only accentuated the darkness.

A small sign tilted to the side made one think the area was not popular at night and that crimes often occurred there.

Stiyl stopped running and started approaching more cautiously.

The road was made of something like bricks rather than asphalt. It was "something like" bricks because it felt more like strangely hard sponge or urethane under his feet. It must have been some new material made by Academy City.

(Where's the transport vehicle…?)

"There it is."

He saw headlights cutting through the darkness about 100 meters ahead. Stiyl wordlessly let go of Patricia's hand and instructed her to wait there using just the movements of his hand.

Stiyl started running without waiting for a response from Patricia.

Something was odd.

He could see a vehicle's headlights ahead, but they were not moving. He could hear the flat engine noise of an idling car. As Stiyl approached, the odd scene gave him a very bad feeling. He scattered rune cards as he approached the vehicle and charged for the front of the vehicle while prepared to create a flame sword at any time.

The bright light dazzled his eyes.

The vehicle looked like a van with all of its windows blocked and it was indeed not moving. The engine seemed to be running, but it was completely stationary.

(It can't be…)

Stiyl gulped.

He gave up trying to hide and produced a flame sword from his right hand. He then circled around to the side of the vehicle.

After leaving the bright light, the truth lay visible before his eyes.

(It can't be!!)

The bullet proof windshield had been smashed to pieces as if it had provided no protection at all. No one sat in the driver seat. The top half of someone hung out of the partially opened door and onto the brick-like road surface.

Stiyl's gaze moved from the driver seat in the front to the back of the vehicle.

The back had a set of double doors. The doors had been forced partway open. Stiyl peered inside, but found nothing. However, the area was filled with an odd atmosphere that made one think something had been there recently.

"…"

Stiyl could not accept that truth.

He reached into the matchbox Theodosia had given him and rechecked the visual data. He rechecked the characteristics of the transport vehicle and its vehicle number. He hoped he had made a mistake, but it all matched no matter how many times he checked.

The horoscope was not there.

That horoscope was supposed to be his trump card.

He could not deny the possibility that Theodosia had false information, but a more credible and hopeless possibility filled Stiyl's mind.

Suddenly, a smell filled Stiyl's nose.

It was the irritating smell of fermented beer.

"Oh, did you get ahead of me?"

The sound of flames swallowing up oxygen reached Stiyl's ears.

The sound was much greater and more inexplicable than the one from the flame sword in his own hand.

The deep darkness was split apart, blotted out, and illuminated by the red of hellfire.

"…"

Stiyl slowly turned around.

A single figure stood there.

He was a Norse magician holding a single sword that was wrapped in flames like a torch.

He was the Lævateinn man.

He was Richard Brave.

Before the man could lightly swing Lævateinn, Stiyl leapt into the artificial forest to the side of the brick-like road. He put out the flame sword in his hand and hid. He had not planned on stopping his enemy's spiritual item from the beginning. That would have been like a knight who did not know the power of a gun charging straight at an enemy.

He was worried about Patricia who he had left back outside the park, but heading toward her would just get her caught up in the danger.

On the trees around him, he complexly arranged rune cards that held various meanings including attack, evasion, and illusion. He wanted to strengthen his position as much as possible.

However, Stiyl quickly found himself about to leave the forest as he ran. The forest in the park was not large enough for a true battle.

(Kh…!!)

In the current situation, being unable to hide put him at an overwhelming disadvantage. Stiyl stood at the outer edge of the forest and glanced around looking for a good place to fight.

"Excellent movements. Lively prey truly is much more interesting."

Richard then started to move. However, he did not chase after Stiyl. Instead he remained standing on the other side of the trees with Lævateinn hanging casually down and used magic.

He used a people clearing spell.

All sorts of sects and denominations had magic with the same effects. Simply put, it was a spell that made sure no one unnecessary would enter the battlefield. As Richard produced such massive flames, it may have been absolutely necessary for him.

However…

(He's politely left a hole open for Patricia Birdway. Since he's creating a trap to invite her in, he must not know where she is.)

As Stiyl analyzed the situation, Richard spoke lightly.

"You should really lay out a people clearing field beforehand. A proper battlefield is needed if you want to have any fun."

Stiyl was not stupid enough to listen to Richard's mockery.

He hid his presence and tried to gather as much information as he could through the gaps in the trees as Richard spoke.

"Hm. Yes, it has definitely already been attacked. I guess you feel like continuing this pointless fight. If you simply hand over the horoscope, I will treat you kindly in turn."

(…What is he saying?)

Stiyl frowned. That made it sound like Richard had not been the one to attack the transport vehicle. There was no point in confusing Stiyl because Richard did not need to stall for time in order to come up with a plan.

But there was something else Stiyl felt was more important to ask about.

He spoke even though doing so threatened to give away his position.

"What happened to Theodosia Electra?"

"Do I even need to answer? Isn't my presence answer enough?"

Something flew away from Richard.

It looked like a box for a ring. It was the epitaph fragment's case that Stiyl had given Theodosia. Its lid had been forced open and the contents were missing.

Its meaning was clear.

It was something Necessarius members were constantly faced with.

"…"

"I'm sure you understand. My Lævateinn is quite powerful. It's useful when it comes to killing an enemy, but leaving behind a corpse is a bit difficult."

"I see," Stiyl replied expressionlessly.

Despite having fought Theodosia in the bank earlier that night, he felt anger.

He did not deny that feeling.

Even if it was inconsistent, he did not feel that it was wrong.

"G A S T T H. T F I A S T R I C! (Bring the flames to my hand. Its form is the sword and its role is execution!)"

After muttering that under his breath, a flame sword burst from his hand.

His power would be used to defeat his enemy.

While the sword gave off light that gave away his position in the darkness, Stiyl glared at Richard Brave's face. Richard spoke upon seeing Stiyl.

"Oh? First Theodosia and now you. Necessarius has a surprising number of people who like to go straight to a fight. Do you not know any way of resolving things other than fighting?"

"I don't need to," Stiyl replied while surrounded by trees covered in countless runes. "All I need to know is that you will die here."

With the roar of oxygen being consumed, the flames whirled.

The same noise came from both Stiyl and Richard.

Richard did not enter the forest. He gently swung Lævateinn in the middle of the brick-like road. That was all it took to create a great sea of flames that headed toward Stiyl.

It was like an avalanche.

However, Stiyl only smiled as it swallowed him up and burned him away like thin paper.

"An illusion," Richard muttered.

A few of the large trees along the road started burning unnaturally at their base. As if the trees had been cut down by flames, they fell toward Richard's head like giant axes.

"Mere child's play."

With a whooshing sound, Richard lightly waved Lævateinn like a traffic guide light and the large trees burned away. His flames were not normal. Richard was not even covered in ashes.

Richard looked around the area.

(If I just look around, my prey will escape.)

Richard realized nothing would happen if his opponent merely remained on his guard, so he stepped from the brick-like road and into the forest. Stiyl had placed rune cards with all sorts of effects throughout that area, but Richard ignored them.

His breathing stopped.

His senses sharpened.

And that was it.

“There.”

The instant Richard looked over, Stiyl charged out from behind a tree. He had determined that hiding would no longer do him any good. Richard swung Lævateinn and burnt away everything from the forest undergrowth to the giant trees. A sea of flames shot out in a straight line and cut through the forest like a firefighter’s hose wearing down a desert sand dune.

“Hh!!”

In response, Stiyl burned through the trees around himself with his flame sword so that they would fall in the path of Lævateinn’s flames. The flames burned through everything evenly. In other words, even the toughest obstacle was burned away in the same amount of time as the tiniest obstacle.

“So you’re trying to force your way through with numbers?”

Stiyl did not respond.

He must have sensed how much of a disadvantage he had, so he fell back. The small park forest was not very large. Before long, Stiyl found himself on a walking path outside of the trees. He started looking around for a better place to fight.

Before he could find anything, Richard arrived.

Or more accurately, his tsunami of flames arrived.

“!?”

Stiyl frantically jumped to the side and the flames cut across the path and into a manmade lake. The water did not evaporate. Instead, it burned like it was made of paper.

No kind of fireproofing had any effect.

Lævateinn burned through everything in its path.

“What’s the matter?” a figure approached from beyond the trees. “Is this really something to get surprised about *now*?”

Without responding, Stiyl scattered runes cards as he ran through the park. The power and range of his magic were set in response to the number of rune cards. His flight had a purpose behind it.

(But…)

He had to be constantly aware of which direction his opponent was coming from, so he could not run at full speed. As such, Stiyl could not escape Richard. The man almost playfully produced spirals of flames two or three times, but Stiyl managed to avoid each one somehow.

(No matter how much I increase the power of my flames, I cannot defeat Lævateinn on a more fundamental level. There's no point in raising your defensive power against an enemy that can burn through thick walls and thin walls in the same amount of time!!)

Stiyl wanted some kind of cover, so he left the arcaded walkway and entered what seemed to be a rest area. It was not a proper building. It was only constructed out of multiple pillars and a roof. A thin wall was set up on one end where many vending machines were lined up.

Most likely due to Richard's people clearing spell, no one was inside.

Stiyl stood before one portion of the line of drink vending machines and then turned around upon feeling a presence behind him.

"Hm," said Richard.

He casually stepped forward.

"I thought a Necessarius magician would try to come and take the epitaph fragment from me. Do you not even have enough leeway to do that?"

In his hand, he held the epitaph fragment Stiyl had left with Theodosia.

It was a portion of an Original grimoire.

"…Are you screwing with me?"

"Not at all," Richard said with a sneer. "Given the situation, I feel that is the most reasonable evaluation."

An explosive noise rang out.

Lævateinn shined even brighter and a huge whirl of flames appeared when Richard swung it lightly. The pure white light of the vending machines was blotted out.

Stiyl arranged the bare minimum of runes and uttered a short spell under his breath. A tiny flame sword appeared.

Stiyl Magnus had to be searching for even the smallest chance.

Both types of flames would provide instant victory with just one hit. They held the destructive power to blow away a human body with the slightest graze. That meant the battle was one of getting the enemy into your range more quickly than they could get you into theirs.

“What courageous prey,” Richard said scornfully.

As he mocked his opponent, he strengthened his grip on Lævateinn.

“Do you want to please me that much?”

As if he was decapitating an invisible man before him, Richard swung his weapon horizontally.

“!!”

But Stiyl reacted before Lævateinn produced a tsunami of flames.

Instead of hopelessly trying to reach the man in time, he stabbed his flame sword directly behind him. One of the drink vending machines was there. The flames melted the plastic as well as the metal.

(…?)

Richard frowned as he moved Lævateinn.

Immediately afterwards, shock covered his face.

With a muffled roar, the vending machine exploded. It had been caused by a phreatic explosion. Stiyl’s flame sword had instantaneously turned the soft drinks to gas. The large amount of steam had needed a way out and had erupted from the hole Stiyl had created.

It almost looked like a laser made of steam.

The steam contained sharp fragments of the plastic bottles and metal cans.

Some of those pieces slipped through the gaps in Lævateinn’s flames and approached Richard Brave.

“But…”

Richard used his wrist to change Lævateinn’s trajectory.

“That is too weak. Much too weak!!”

In response to his motion, the direction of the flames changed as well. It blew away the deadly fragments as well as the steam surrounding them. The flames burned through it all evenly.

(Next is my turn!! And this will end it!!)

Richard started to swing Lævateinn once more, but he then realized something.

A thin, thin smile was on Stiyl's face on the other side of the flames.

"People have a surprising number of blind spots." He pointed at Richard's face. "Maybe you should have thought a little more carefully about what burning that steam meant."

By the time Richard realized what he meant, it was too late.

♦

It was true that most of the steam from the explosion had headed in a straight line for Richard. However, not all of it had. A portion of the steam had departed from the main blast and dampened the air around its target rather than striking him.

That portion had been ignited as well.

The steam that had evenly spread around him had ignited.

And Lævateinn burned through everything evenly.

What that meant was…

Richard had blown himself up.

The flames lit everything up with its bright light as it enveloped him.

While that happened, Stiyl immediately jumped to the side of the vending machine he had destroyed. The flames that burned Richard headed back along the path the steam had taken, burned away the entire vending machine, and started to spread throughout the entire rest area.

Stiyl headed out of the rest area and onto bare ground where he tried to catch his breath. A throbbing pain spread throughout his back. He had not been directly hit by Lævateinn, but he had been very near the vending machine when it had exploded. It would have been more surprising if it had not harmed him at all.

However, he felt more relief than pain.

Stiyl spoke quietly as he watched the flames.

"…Now see the true form of what you have been scattering about."

♦

Stiyl thought as he pulled out a new cigarette, put it in his mouth, and lit it.

(Looks like I managed to put a stop to that attack. I guess he must have had the Alaskan rune epitaph fragment. Well, an Original can't be destroyed, so I can just search through his ashes and retrieve it once the flames disappear.)

For an instant, Patricia came to mind, but he decided it was too soon to call for her. The flames were still dangerous until they had been fully extinguished and, more importantly, he had no intention of calling her into an area where someone had been killed.

But then suddenly Richard Brave blew away the sea of flames with an explosive wind.

"An excellent counterattack…"

His clothes were burned in places and the melted fibers must have stuck to his skin because his skin had discolorations that did not look quite like dark stains or burns. Even so, Richard had not been defeated. He had received flames that burned through concrete and asphalt like they were thin paper soaked in oil, but he had not been defeated.

However, Stiyl's expression was not one of fear.

"But since I have survived, the only fate left for you is to be turned to ash."

It was a smile.

It was the smile of a cornered beast that had gained a chance to turn things around.

"Since you're still alive, that means those flames are not absolute. There is some means of avoiding them."

"Don't try to act tough," cut in Richard, shaking his head. "You were afraid of a straight fight, so you came up with some plan and it failed. It's obvious how this will end."

He raised Lævateinn up above his head.

Something changed.

A sea of flames was not created as before. Before it became a mass of flames, it became a massive whirl of sparks. The wind blew them toward Stiyl, creating something similar to a random carpet bombing.

Holes opened up in the ground like in a sponge.

The flames spread from those holes.

“!?”

Stiyl immediately turned around and ran.

Before the whirl of sparks could get above his head, he ran in a direction the wind would not blow them in. But even though he was not directly hit, the countless sparks that fell to the ground quickly surrounded him. It was like hundreds of arrows with the ends lit had been fired.

(Not good. I’m surrounded…!)

There were a few gaps, but he would definitely be showered by the sparks if he tried to force his way through them. And that would be all it would take to turn his body into a pile of ashes.

“I see,” smiled Richard from the other side of the orange curtain. “Even now, you are not trying to use the horoscope as a means to negotiate. …Perhaps I was too quick to jump to conclusions. It seems it was neither you nor me that acquired it.”

In that case, he need not hesitate to kill him.

Richard lightly waved Lævateinn and the ring of flames surrounding Stiyl slowly approached.

“…Do you want the Alaskan runes that badly?” said Stiyl as he tried to come up with a way out of his predicament. “Close examination of your actions will show plenty of unnatural things. In other words, the Anglican Church will eventually take action. It’s true the Alaskan runes are rare and valuable, but is that really enough to make an enemy of the entire Anglican Church? Do you really think you can survive that?”

“Mere survival? My objective is the annihilation of the Anglican Church.”

A slight smile appeared on Richard’s face for the first time.

It was neither a sarcastic smile nor a mocking one.

It was filled with hatred and the feeling of fulfilling that hatred.

“And the Alaskan runes are nothing more than the key.”

“…?”

“The Dvergr. As a rune user, surely you have at least heard of them.”

Stiyl’s breath caught in his throat and Richard continued speaking while holding Lævateinn.

“The power of the Norse gods is symbolized by their weapons. Odin has the spear Gungnir and Thor has the hammer Mjölnir. The lightning god exists as a set with the spiritual item that calls in lightning attacks. In other words, the power of the gods and the power of their weapons are one and the same.”

An ominous flame flickered on Lævateinn’s surface.

“Of course, they are not mere spiritual items. My theory is that the weapons are a special spiritual item combined with a connection ceremony that strongly binds it with the user. It may be something like a large scale version of the types of ceremonies used to complete symbolic weapons that are specialized for a specific magic user. The connection is so great that the god with the lightning hammer becomes known as the lightning god.” Richard paused for a second. “But oddly enough, they were created by the Dvergr, a different race from the gods. *The gods themselves do not know how to make the weapons that symbolize their own power*. In other words, the power of the Norse gods does not belong to the gods.”

“…Are you serious?” Stiyl frowned. “That theory has no real basis. For example, Lævateinn was created by the god Loki, not the Dvergr.”

“Heh heh. There are doubts about whether he really counts as one of the gods, but whatever. I’m sure you know the flaw in your argument. …There is a story where Loki cut off the goddess Sif’s golden hair which brought her husband Thor’s wrath upon him,” Richard said seeming to enjoy himself. “In order to avoid Thor’s retribution, Loki had to swear he would return Sif’s hair to normal. To do this, he had a group of Dvergr brothers create golden hair that grows just like real hair.”

“…”

“It may be true that Loki had the ability to create a weapon of the gods, but if his ability was greater than that of the Dvergr, that story would not have been created. He would simply have had to create the golden hair on his own. …What this means is simple, don’t you think? The Dvergr have skills that Loki cannot compare to.”

The Dvergr.

They were a type of creature that lived underground and were also known as dwarfs, but everything about them was wrapped in mystery including their origin. In Norse mythology, the entire world was created by the gods using a giant’s corpse as the material, but there were a few exceptions.

The Alfar and the Dvergr.

They were something like bugs that came forth from the giant's corpse on their own. In other words, they were rare existences that had come to be by their own power and lived within the world ruled by the gods despite not having existed before the creation of the world and not having been created at the command of the gods.

"What are the Dvergr in the first place?" continued Richard without counterattacking. "They came to be, ignoring the commands of Odin. They know means of manufacturing weapons that even the gods do not and they are the ones that truly gave the gods their power. …The more you learn about them, the less they seem to fit the rules of Norse mythology."

"You don't mean…"

"I do not know their identity, but they at least had something that could not be explained by those who believed in Norse mythology and passed down those stories. Doesn't that seem like a reasonable explanation?"

The epitaph fragment Richard held had been discovered in Alaska.

The Norse lands were in northern Europe.

However, the Vikings had believed in Norse mythology and, in their golden age, they had crossed the Atlantic Ocean and reached the eastern end of North America. That was well before Columbus. So wasn't it possible they had walked as far as Alaska?

In other words, there may have been a connection between their materials and information.

The identity of the Dvergr.

The identity of a race that had techniques that not even the head Norse god could use. In other words, techniques that did not fall inside the category of Norse mythology.

"Are you saying they were people…?"

"In legends related to advanced techniques, especially methods of manufacturing steel, specific races or cultures often appear in the mythologies. A stereotypical example is having elves or fairies hating steel because an indigenous group that fought using copper was defeated by weapons of steel. Am I wrong?"

"…"

In the case of Japan, there were indeed theories concerning the terms “steel” and “race” regarding the slaying of Yamata no Orochi. Stiyl was able to recall similar legends from around the world because of his knowledge of magic.

“I don’t know if the Dvergr refer to a specific race or is formed from a collection of separate groups that had mastered exceedingly difficult skills. Either way, someone like that had to have existed.”

(This is bad.)

Stiyl had that thought because he had figured out what Richard Brave was after.

“The weapons of the gods are only complete when the weapon is brought together with the god. Most likely, the Dvergr had the skill to create exceedingly powerful spiritual items, but their connection spells to bind them to the user were weak. The gods kept the connection spells to themselves, so they were able to control the Dvergr even though the Dvergr could create such great power. Otherwise, Norse mythology would have been filled with the Dvergr.”

But…

“Doesn’t that also mean the weapons themselves can actually be used?”

Richard Brave’s words were like something from a nightmare.

Stiyl groaned as Richard joyfully continued.

“The Dvergr were not an exaggerated fictional legend. They were nothing more than people.”

His smile grew even wider.

“And if they were human, then the techniques they used to manufacture the weapons of the gods are something that mere humans can use. Do you understand what that means? We can freely wield the techniques that gave the gods their power in the form of their weapons!! Let me ask you again: Do you understand what that means!?”

“Didn’t you just say that the spiritual item alone did not complete the weapon? Even if your theory is correct, you can’t use the power of the gods without the connection ceremony they kept to themselves!!”

Stiyl’s words reached a yell by the end.

His priority may have been on denying what Richard was saying.

“But isn’t that enough? True, the Dvergr could not defeat the gods. They could only wield a portion of the weapons’ powers, so there was just too much of a gap between them and the gods who could draw out 100% of the power,” Richard replied simply. He had no need to hesitate. “But there is no one in modern times who can fully wield those weapons. Even the level of the Dvergr is more than enough to conquer the world. As long as you have the means of manufacturing the weapons, you can force your way through with overwhelming power.”

He may have been right.

If you had a weapon with such great power, you might be able to start a war with only a portion of its power. In a war against humans rather than a war against the gods, that would be enough to win.

And…

If Richard Brave acquired such a weapon and then researched and researched until he had a connection spell equal to or greater than the one of the Norse gods…

(This is bad…)

The Anglican Church was a denomination of the Christian Church.

They used spells related to divine miracles, but they were nothing more than a small portion of that power. They had no way to draw out 100% of the Son of God’s power.

But the Dvergr’s techniques were different.

They had the power that had given the Norse gods their power.

With the holy spear Gungnir that Odin used, you had 100% of Odin’s attack power. With the lightning hammer Mjölnir that Thor used, you had 100% of Thor’s lightning element power.

The term “Magic God” floated up in the back of Stiyl’s mind.

The term did not refer to the god of the demon world.

It referred to one who had so utterly mastered magic that he or she entered the territory of a god.

(The Anglican Church is an organization that specializes in anti-magician techniques. And Richard can’t have mastered a connection spell yet. Even if he has gained the power of the Dvergr, that is not enough to completely decide things here.)

Stiyl and Richard glared at each other with a wall of flames between them.

(But his actions will surely cause a war to develop. He intends to begin a long, drawn-out war against a nation all on his own.)

Such a war could last 10 or even 50 years.

How many people would fall during such a war?

Stiyl's comrades might be killed. Not everyone in the United Kingdom was a magician. Whether they were experts or amateurs, they would be killed indiscriminately.

Or would such a war become the final battle spoken of in Norse mythology where all races including the gods would be wiped out and the entire world would head to its destruction?

Was Ragnarök beginning?

"…So your goal is to use the weapons of the Dvergr? Or is it stopping the Anglican Church from continuing its analysis of this?"

"You could say it's both and you could say it's neither," replied Richard simply. "As I told you before, my objective is the annihilation of the Anglican Church. In doing so, I will use the techniques of the Dvergr and as a result, the Anglican Church's analysis will be forever stopped."

What was that man's reason for hating the Anglican Church so much?

Before Stiyl could find that out, Richard ended the conversation.

"Let's bring this to an end."

A great roar came from the flames surrounding Stiyl.

"I have the epitaph fragment. Without you, Patricia Birdway is now defenseless. If I can just acquire the horoscope, the balance of the world will tip in my favor."

The surrounding flames tightened in.

The walls of flames closed in in order to kill Stiyl.

(Something…)

He could not force his way through. But it could not be over. After all, Richard Brave had been covered in his own Lævateinn flames and had survived.

(There has to be something!! If I can figure out what that is…!!)

How were the flames produced in the first place? Merely carving the torch rune on the sword was like scattering something like alcohol around and lighting it. It was not enough to cause what was happening.

(There has to be a trick it uses to make things burn and the way around it has to be directly connected to it!! Think! Don't give up!! Giving up won't change anything, so think even up to the point where death is staring you straight in the eye!!)

Rune magic. Lævateinn. Flames that burned away everything. A spiritual item. Sgkalu. It was impossible just by carving that onto the surface of the sword. Norse mythology. The techniques of the Dvergr. A smell like fermenting beer. The meaning of the runes. The torch that acquired the sun using magic.

"It's no use," was Richard's final remark as he watched Stiyl. "Give up."

The flames approached all at once.

Stiyl did not shut his eyes to the very end.

♦

Richard Brave sighed disinterestedly as he stared into the roaring whirl of flames.

One problem with his Lævateinn was that its power was so great he could not hold back. If Stiyl had used Patricia as a shield, he might have had a bit of trouble dealing with it, but luckily Stiyl had not opted to do so.

"I guess it's over."

Moving only his eyes, Richard looked to the side.

Stiyl Magnus lay collapsed a short distance away. An unpleasant smell was coming from his clothes in places, but it was not due to Richard's flames. Lævateinn would have burned him away, not even leaving any ashes behind. Stiyl had immediately detonated his flame sword at his own feet in order to use the explosive wind to escape.

The Lævateinn flames had surrounded Stiyl, but…

"I never expected you to use that flame sword to lift up the burning ground itself. That was quite skillful, but do you really think you've escaped?"

He seemed to have prepared some kind of fireproofing spell, but it did not seem to have been a very strong one. As a result, Stiyl had not been able to suppress his own flames and the blast had knocked him unconscious.

It had all been in order to just barely escape from Lævateinn.

Stiyl lay face up and unmoving while Richard observed him. After confirming that it was not an illusion or a fake made of packed dirt, Richard adjusted his grip on Lævateinn.

(I don't need to fear someone on his level, but this could get to be a real pain if Patricia gets involved. I guess I should crush him here.)

The roar of the air being consumed by flames strengthened.

He raised Lævateinn and its sinister light blew away the kind darkness.

But the end did not come.

This was due to a single small stone.

Of course, it had not come from Stiyl as he was unconscious.

It had suddenly been thrown from an area to Richard's side.

It was not a spiritual item that had special magical effects. It had not been given overwhelming speed using some kind of attack spell.

It was truly just a small stone that had been picked up from the ground and thrown with all the thrower's might.

In truth, Richard did not even turn around. Lævateinn activated on its own and turned the small stone to ash before it could strike Richard.

But Richard's movements still stopped.

This was not due to fear or surprise.

On his face was a ghastly smile that made it look like he had just seen the most amusing thing in the world.

"What are you trying to do?"

A girl of around 12 stood there.

She was not a magician and she did not understand what was taking place there.

And she was a foolish girl who had come all that way in order to save Stiyl Magnus.

"You may know nothing about magic, but you are still a smart girl. I'm sure you've been able to figure out that this place is ruled by some kind of mysterious set of laws."

His voice held no piercing hostility. Instead, there was a strange, viscous sweetness there. It had a way of destroying people's standpoints even further, causing them to lose their strength.

But Patricia did not respond. She moved her muddy hand and picked up another small stone. With her eyes practically clenched shut, she gathered all her strength and threw the pathetic weapon at Richard.

"Get away from him…" she said in a trembling voice.

How much fear did she hold in that small body of hers? How much confusion did she hold inside? Whatever the answer, Patricia pushed it aside and spoke.

"Get away from him. Move!! You need to leave!!"

"I see."

Richard smiled.

The smile showed scorn toward everything and was filled with all the malice of the living beings known as humans.

"Heh heh. You are soaked in virtue. You are most certainly a kind person and that kindness has taken the place of what is right. But did you know that you have just denied everything that magician fought so hard for?"

"Eh…?"

"It should be obvious! He was fighting to protect you. He was fighting to prevent having you stand on this battlefield!! Nn, so what are you doing casually walking out here? First Theodosia Electra and now him. It seems a vain death is all an Anglican magician gets!!"

Patricia trembled upon hearing that.

She had not known that Theodosia Electra had lost to Richard.

The shock left her frozen in place and Richard stuck his hand in his pocket.

"Let's make a bet, Patricia."

(A missing limb or two won't have any effect on the ceremony.)

He pulled out a small stone and tossed it so it landed at her feet.

Anyone who knew of magic understood its value.

It was the fragment of the Alaskan rune epitaph.

It may have been just a small piece, but it was still a true Original grimoire.

“That item is a symbol of magic. Technically, it is a portion of a grimoire, but it can also be used as an automatic spiritual item.”

Patricia was confused, so Richard spoke slowly and simply.

“Do you understand? If you use that, you can use the same mysterious power he and I can.”

Stop!

If Stiyl had been conscious, that is surely what he would have shouted.

Not even expert magicians like Stiyl or Richard could properly use something like an Original grimoire. Not to mention that the Alaskan rune epitaph had been sealed by the Dawn-Colored Sunlight. Nothing could be done with the epitaph fragment without the horoscope for Donati’s Comet.

Richard knew all that, but he still tried to lure her in.

He was enjoying the prospect of her touching the Original, causing it to explode.

It was a labyrinth. All of the exits were already sealed, so he could simply smile as he watched his prey struggle with the pointless gimmicks prepared within. No matter how far his prey continued, they would never reach the end and he would whip them if they tried to stop even for an instant.

“What will you do?” Richard asked calmly.

No one could stop him.

No one would stand up for Patricia.

“Oh, right. Be careful how you use it. An Original’s self-defense functions are quite powerful. Not even magicians like us can deal with it. If you screw up, you won’t just lose a limb or two. You may come to regret your decision here for the rest of your life.”

“…”

“But an Original holds enough possibility to make that risk worth it. There is a small chance you might be able to even save that pathetic magician. Do you understand what I am saying, Patricia?” His words invited her into the abyss. “Your only chance lies there. Now, will you grab it or waste it? The choice is yours.”

The small girl unsteadily looked down at the epitaph fragment that lay at her feet.

Unless that stone were a garnet laser, Patricia had no idea how it could possibly hold such great power.

(If…)

But it truly seemed that some kind of mysterious set of laws was ruling that place.

(If that truly is what he says it is…)

As Richard had said, even Patricia understood that much. She could at least tell that the power Stiyl and Theodosia had wielded to protect her had not been mere deceptions.

In that case, it was possible that stone had enough power to be valuable enough to risk one's life over. After all, Stiyl, Theodosia, and Richard had been desperately fighting over it.

It held the power needed to escape her trapped situation.

On the other hand, it held enough power that Patricia would be swallowed up if she failed to control it.

It was like a bomb.

"Uuh…"

Something in her heart yelled for her to stop.

A mysterious set of laws she did not understand existed. Using it, one could cause strange phenomena like Richard had been. But Patricia did not understand what exactly those laws were. The term "spell" was a mystery to her and the term "magic power" left her drawing a blank. Telling her to use that power in that situation was like handing the steering wheel to an elementary school student while driving down the highway.

She would fail.

She did not know why, but she knew that she would fail if she tried.

"Uwaaaahhh!!"

But Patricia still reached out her hand.

Her hand shook as it slowly stretched out. She stretched her hand out toward the epitaph fragment so slowly even she thought it to be foolish. She could imagine that something would happen the instant she touched it and she knew it would not be what she wanted, but a drowning man will try to grab at even straw.

Her small hand and small fingers touched the rough surface of the stone.

(It's over.)

Richard's face twisted into a smile.

He was wrapped in the joy of victory.

(I now have the epitaph fragment and the remains of Patricia. Now I just need to find the horoscope, but I'll have some time before the Anglican Church sends out new pursuer. I know it's inside Academy City, so I can take my time in my search.)

And then…

A great noise exploded out from the epitaph fragment.

Just as she touched the surface of the small stone, Patricia's arm shot backwards. She grimaced in pain and the epitaph fragment shot into the air as if to distance itself from her. A pale light showing some magical phenomenon had occurred could be seen in the darkness.

"…"

But Richard's expression was not one of joy.

After all, that had not been the result he had been expecting. The Original had not gone out of control.

Instead, an explosion had occurred.

It had been a shockwave caused by a third party in order to distance the Original from Patricia.

"Damn…you…" muttered Richard Brave as he turned his head to the side.

Seeing that, Patricia looked over in that direction while holding her arm.

"Stiyl…?" she said.

She received no response.

A priest slowly stood up in the direction they were looking.

He had long hair dyed red, pierced ears, silver rings on all 10 fingers, a cigarette in his mouth, and a barcode tattoo under his right eye. It was clearly Stiyl Magnus standing there.

He was burned.

Parts of his clothes had burned off and a burnt smell permeated the air.

But he was not dead.

That magician would not die.

"…"

Richard Brave's response was actually quite simple.

His enemy had stood up, so he swung Lævateinn.

With a roar, a sea of flames exploded out.

A raging crimson tsunami attacked Stiyl Magnus.

That destructive attack would crush the weak and the strong evenly. The flames instantly enveloped his entire body and the light enveloped him to the point that not even his silhouette could be seen.

Stiyl Magnus had not spoken a word.

Seeing that, Patricia uttered a terrible scream.

But…

With an idiotic sound, Stiyl Magnus blew away the sea of flames.

He was unharmed.

Those flames would swallow up anything in their path and evenly burn away everything they swallowed up.

That was the absolute attack produced by Lævateinn.

With nothing more than a swing of his flame sword, Stiyl had sliced that attack in two so it passed by him on either side.

A few stubborn bits of flames smoldered down at his feet, but Stiyl simply crushed them underfoot. Stiyl Magnus mercilessly destroyed that horrible weapon that would burn away anything that touched even a spark from it.

That should have been impossible.

It was like he had risen from the dead.

What he had done was no coincidence. It was not a miracle that had no reason behind it. The spells used by true magicians did not allow for such things. That meant there had to be a reason. There was a reason Stiyl had been able to stand up and eliminate Richard's flames.

Richard Brave was utterly shocked.

He could not see Stiyl Magnus's expression.

"What…?" Richard forced the words out of his dry throat. "How could you break through Lævateinn with a toy like that?"

Stiyl Magnus did not respond.

Only anger could be seen on his face.

That anger was not in response to having been injured himself. It was not due to something as trivial as that. His anger was enough to swallow up the crimson glow of Lævateinn and it was for the sake of the girl who had been forced to hopelessly stand alone as she was toyed with over the magic she did not understand and was forced to jump into what she knew was a trap. It was for the girl who there was no need to harm but had been almost injured for the purpose of some twisted bit of fun.

"…Richard Brave."

Stiyl spoke that name of evil and tension ran through the one it belonged to.

He had Lævateinn in his hand and he had an overwhelming advantage, but that voice drove all that out of his mind.

Stiyl Magnus glared at him.

He glared at his enemy.

He glared at the face of the enemy he had to kill as quickly as possible.

"It seems you truly want to die here."

A new whirl of flames appeared.

It was different from Lævateinn.

It simply glowed.

That overwhelming whirl of flames appeared in order to save the girl who had wandered into the world of magic.

...ARE THE TWO OF THEM EVEN REALLY IN DANGER?
WHAT DO YOU MEAN ?!
THE ITEM WAS GONE ...
AND THERE WERE JUST TOO MANY OF THEM WAITING FOR US.
IT WAS AS IF THEY KNEW WHAT WE WERE GOING TO DO BEFORE-HAND...
ARE YOU SUSPEC-TING US ?!
NO.
TAP
taptaptap....
Damn, can't get a hold of Index!
WE NEED TO HURRY BACK. —
TAP
TAP
TAP

I AM SUSPECTING MY BOSS.
NO WAY.
SHE WOULDN'T SACRIFICE HER OWN SUBORDI-NATES...
.....WOULD SHE?
That was close.
WELL...
ACTU-ALLY...
TO HER, WE ARE NOTHING MORE THAN SMALL GEARS WITHIN A LARGER PLAN.
AND OUR SURVIVAL IS NOT A NECESSARY PART OF THAT PLAN'S SUCCESS.
Tch.
WELL, WHAT WE HAVE TO DO DOESN'T CHANGE EITHER WAY.
?

WHETHER YOUR BOSS IS THE KIND OF PERSON YOU SAY SHE IS...
It seems something else is going on at the park.
Should we give up here?
WE STILL NEED TO HEAD BACK TO THEM.
RIGHT ?
!
OR WE'RE JUST IMAGINING THINGS...
... TRUE.

Well, I'm used to this...
Ah ha ha
...But I'm surprised we managed to escape from so many people.

NOW THEN ...
Is Index okay?
AH.

WELCOME BACK, TOUMA.
Ah...
SO YOU'RE BACK.
アイスバー

What's wrong?
...WAIT, BOSS!
IS THAT ...!!!
The Donati Horoscope
!?
SHE'S JUST HAPPILY EATING POPSICLES!!
Exhausted
WHAT IS GOING ON?
Um...

Part 5

He had not been given a reason.

At first, all he received was the ruling.

“Richard Brave. A concern has arisen that your primary spell, Lævateinn, is in violation of the treaty. Immediately take corrective measures or, if that is impossible, dispose of the spell.”

He had not been given the opportunity to plead his case.

At first, he had only profited.

Lævateinn was Richard Brave’s greatest weapon. Richard had created that weapon after researching countless things, repeating countless experiments, working for countless hours, and fine-tuning it countless times. It was the symbol of his life as he had deemed it worthy to dedicate his life to.

That spell had prevented many tragedies.

He had followed his orders and killed many enemies with it.

He had nothing else.

If it was taken from him, he would have nothing left.

And he believed in Lævateinn to the point he did not care if he had nothing else.

But he could not overturn it.

He could not overturn the unilateral order from the higher ups of the Anglican Church telling him to dispose of it.

“…”

That had been a turning point in his life.

Everything about Richard Brave became twisted, his hatred for the Anglican Church had grown within him, and he had pursued Lævateinn even further by desiring the skills of the Dvergr.

From that turning point, he had headed for the flames of hell.

♦

An explosion rang out.

A shockwave roared through the nighttime park and the wall of flames wavered due to external forces.

Two figures danced within the orange-tinted landscape.

Stiyl Magnus.

Richard Brave.

The two flame magicians ran through the park, the walking path, and the forest. The battlefield changed from one moment to the next. They left Patricia Birdway behind and their battlefield moved across the land and continued through the darkness like a living being. The all-consuming flames of Lævateinn no longer simply chased after Stiyl. Stiyl's flame sword evenly matched Lævateinn. He received blows and even countered.

As he ran, Stiyl pulled out a few rune cards.

Stiyl's runes activated after he arranged them.

His magic displayed its greatest power within an area he himself indicated, so he should not have been able to use his proper strength while constantly on the move.

However, the cards floated in midair.

Countless cards flew around like swallows and created magic circles, sticking to the trees, the ground, and the streetlights.

Richard's expression twisted.

(*So he set up other runes to send out his main runes.* …He just has little tricks all over the place.)

In order to create one piece of magic, Stiyl had two or three different spells prepared. Normally, it would have been impossible in that situation, but Stiyl's power continued to rise.

"!!"

"!?"

They spoke no words.

Only the sound of their breathing escaped their mouths.

They pressed in, trying to kill the other as they sliced through the darkness using their glowing magic swords. The two small pillars of flames clashed in midair and continually repelled each other as if there truly was a steel sword within. The great sounds of the impacts reverberated through the air.

Stiyl Magnus was not burned to death.

Up until then, Richard's Lævateinn had burned through everything it had come into contact with. That included building walls, asphalt, Stiyl's flame sword, and Theodosia's explosive blast. However, that was no longer happening. Richard's sword and Stiyl's sword were evenly matched.

Richard felt a close-quarters battle would not be to his advantage, so he created masses of flames to swallow up Stiyl, but Stiyl Magnus would slice through them or evade them and then fill in the gap between them after that slight lag.

Richard's victory was crumbling.

The battle had jumped its set rails and was now rushing toward some unknown place.

(What is going on…?)

Richard started panicking inwardly as he gripped his weapon.

Lævateinn was the ultimate spiritual item that could burn through anything with no exceptions. However, Stiyl was matching it evenly. Instead of fleeing or being swallowed up by the flames, he was truly fighting. A true battle to the death where neither party knew how it would end had begun.

(How can he eliminate my Lævateinn so easily?)

The term "misfire" entered Richard's mind.

For some reason, Lævateinn was not displaying its proper power. That was why someone as supposedly weak as Stiyl was catching up to him.

But…

(No, this is…)

Stiyl was not one to overestimate his abilities.

He did not randomly charge in to a fight. If he detected the slightest bit of danger, he would unhesitatingly fall back and he would not force his way in even if he saw an opportunity. Richard gritted his teeth. Stiyl knew where the line between safety and danger was. After everything Richard had seen, he could not account for Stiyl's survival as being based on "coincidence" or "good luck".

“Don’t tell me…”

Richard spoke as he swung Lævateinn which produced a sea of flames that spread out like a tsunami. It was a meaningless question for a magician in mid-battle. In fact, it had a chance of providing his opponent with a means of victory in some situations.

“Don’t tell me you’ve figured it out!”

Even so, he said it.

He said it despite what his reason told him.

In response, Stiyl swung his flame sword with his right hand and used his left hand to pull his cigarette from his mouth. He did not need to light it. It had already been lit with an orange light due to the attacks they had been exchanging.

He swung his flame sword and sliced the all-engulfing tsunami of flames right down the middle. Lævateinn’s flames did not burn away everything as before. Stiyl Magnus had truly destroyed the tsunami of flames.

And he spoke.

“Lævateinn is not the primary part of your attack.”

A cold sweat poured from Richard’s body.

It was not due to the heat of his flames or from all the running around. It was the uncomfortable cold sweat of someone in serious trouble.

The flow of the battle had changed.

Stiyl Magnus would be on the attack.

“You can’t create that kind of effect just by carving runes into a metal sword. That makes it simple. You must have carved runes somewhere other than the sword. It’s probably something along the lines of a combination of eihwaz, berkana, and wunjo. You were not creating the firepower needed to burn your target regardless of what it was made of. You used runes to change your target into a material that would burn away even with the smallest flame.”

Stiyl Magnus and Richard Brave were both rune magicians.

Runes created various phenomena when they were carved into various objects.

Whether you were creating a sea of flames that would swallow up everything or a lightning attack that would rain down from the heavens and blow everything away, you always had to start by carving the runes somewhere.

So where were they carved?

Stiyl could not see how the runes carved into the sword would be able to create the effects he had seen.

In that case, where else could they be?

“Seeing that you were able to carve them into my flame sword and Theodosia’s explosion of flames, the runes must be in some kind of premade ‘stamp’ that you can fire like a bullet. Lævateinn itself shows no sign of using any other runes, so that makes the most sense.”

(I see. So he isn’t a complete fool!!)

Stiyl was dead on.

But Richard still smiled.

“Sorry, but I can’t say that’s right. Lævateinn burns away everything. It uses no clichéd tricks like that.”

Information was a weapon.

Disturbance was a type of strategy.

“If I was spreading around runes that turned my target into a highly flammable material, I’m sure someone like you would have noticed them. Of course, if you were so stupid you wouldn’t even notice a rune carved into your own body, it might work, but not even you are that stupid.”

Once your trick was discovered, you were dead.

On the other hand, if you misread the situation, you would create an opening leading to your death.

But…

Stiyl laughed scornfully.

That sent a bad feeling throughout Richard’s body and then he heard the last thing he wanted to hear.

“You would just need to carve the runes using some kind of invisible ink.”

At that, the battle stopped.

Stiyl and Richard literally stopped moving.

Richard held Lævateinn which supposedly held the ultimate destructive power and he stared at his enemy while the sword's tip shook like a record needle.

He could no longer easily approach.

Even the slightest mistake could now cause his defeat.

"I noticed a smell like fermenting beer."

Stiyl had stopped moving and now simply carefully observed the situation without acting triumphant or attacking.

"At first, I thought you were using the flammability of alcohol in some way, but I was wrong. If all of the magical phenomena you are creating are done by carving runes into objects, then everything you have must be there for that purpose. That made this simple. It had to be the ink you were using."

Their shadows wavered.

This was not due to the magicians' movements. It was due to the irregular movements of the flames providing the light.

Richard Brave was frozen solid like he was a statue.

"My guess is it's vitamin B2. A lot of it is found in malt and I believe it reflects a yellow light when it receives strong UV rays in the darkness. Basically, you just have to hide a water gun or spray bottle in your sleeve to carve the runes long distance in the same motion as swinging your arm."

(Not good.)

Richard had gone from taking a short break to read the situation to having his muscles lock up.

"The runes on Lævateinn read sgkalu. It means 'the torch that acquired the sun using magic'. That does not refer to a powerful flame. It is a conductor's baton used to produce the same UV rays as in sunlight in order to make the invisible runes you have spread about visible at the proper time."

Richard's Lævateinn had two modes.

The first simply produced flames and was used to set fire to his surroundings.

The second amplified UV rays to make only the needed runes visible, turning the objects they were on into a highly flammable substance.

"…"

Stiyl had seen through it all.

Deep wrinkles covered Richard Brave's face.

Regardless of the type of magic, you had to come up with a countermeasure once you discovered its trick. That was why a battle between magicians was more a type of battle of wits than it was a physical battle. Stiyl Magnus had already seen through everything Richard had. That meant he would next be using a means of sealing that trick and turning the situation around. One method magicians used was to cover an old trick with a new one and then attack. Richard admitted he had to be on his guard. Next, it was his turn to figure out Stiyl's trick. He had just determined to use his intelligence to survive when…

(…Wait a second.)

Richard Brave suddenly realized something.

It was a very small thing.

Stiyl had indeed seen through all of Lævateinn's tricks. Richard's strategy was completely destroyed.

But…

All the damage Stiyl Magnus had taken was still there.

"…"

Richard looked at the enemy standing before him.

This time, he truly *looked* at him.

That magician had been wrapped in flames, had been exposed to great heat, had breathed in smoke, and had been hit by the shockwave of the phreatic explosion he had caused. How much damage had he taken altogether? Even if he had discovered the trick, did he have the physical and mental strength left to come up with and carry out a strategy to turn the situation around?

Even if it was a battle of wits, physical strength was still needed.

Just as one could not use their full strength sleep deprived, there was a bare minimum level of physical strength needed for your brain to function properly.

Did Stiyl have that much strength left?

With all the damage he had taken, he could not have enough strength left to defeat Lævateinn. He just couldn't.

Even if Lævateinn's strange method of causing flammability was sealed, the flames it produced normally were nothing to laugh at. Even if the flames were just used to support the vitamin B2 trick, they were surely still enough to cause a human to suffer, to burn them, and even kill them if used right.

In truth, Stiyl's outer appearance showed just how bad a situation he was in. He was breathing erratically, his skin was injured, and his clothes were covered in mud. Stiyl had truly taken plenty of damage.

And yet…

Even so…

He still stabbed his flame sword in toward Richard Brave.

He blew away the hell of flames that Lævateinn created.

It was as if he were responding to the shouts of a small girl who was about to be trampled.

He was acting to protect Patricia Birdway.

"Damn…you…How can you go on…?" Richard muttered in shock.

No matter how many times he went over it in his head, it did not make sense.

His thoughts alone were not enough to understand it.

"…You don't understand?" Stiyl Magnus said.

His expression was not one that showed he felt the enemy before him was of greater or even equal strength to himself.

"Then you are not a true enemy of mine."

His expression held only anger and scorn.

Perhaps some pity was mixed in as well.

"You are only a target."

Just as he muttered that as if reciting it, the flame magician Stiyl took a large step forward.

♦

Stiyl Magnus knew that his body was near its limit.

Richard had no way of knowing that Stiyl had fought Theodosia Electra before him. Thinking back on it, that had been a heavy blow. Unlike in the battle against Richard, that fight had left damage to the core of his body. Stiyl had been forced into back-to-back fights and had even had to track down Theodosia, a supposed ally, but he smiled. His body had subconsciously ranked the damage that ached within it. In that ranking, the damage from Theodosia was higher than that from Richard. That was why Stiyl smiled. Even he found it strange how happy it made him that Theodosia's strikes for Patricia's sake had been heavier than the shallow attacks from that bastard Richard.

"!!"

Stiyl headed forward in what could have been seen as a careless action and Richard swung Lævateinn. Stiyl's flame sword clashed with it, causing sparks to fly through the air.

"That spell of yours certainly has a unique method of use," said Stiyl as weapon clashed with weapon. "You said you hate the Anglican Church. In that case, I'm guessing the reason behind all this is the treaty. In truth, it is difficult to call the coloration effect of vitamin B2 a purely magical method. All the magicians you faced in the past were led astray due to that and burned to death in your flames."

The world was split into the magic side and the science side.

And the two sides had created a treaty to ensure neither side invaded the other. Richard's Lævateinn spell stood right on the border of that treaty.

"You don't understand…"

Hints of hatred entered Richard's tone.

It was all contained in that small statement.

Stiyl thought.

Richard was not alone. Most modern magicians did not use only the same materials as had been used in ages past for their magic. Even Stiyl used copy paper and lamination to make his rune cards easier to use.

Magic could be activated using only the products found within a convenience store. There was no need to only rely on rare and expensive antiques. One used the most accessible materials to create the most simplified spells in order to wield the most powerful magic. That was the most convenient thing to do for someone who was relying on magic to survive while they fought.

However, that incomprehensible treaty had appeared.

The treaty ensured that science and magic would not encroach on each other's territories. No clear line had ever been decided on. A line some unknown person had come up with was followed and whether something violated it or not could almost seem arbitrary. A method that was considered valid one day would be considered unusable the next.

Everything was based on the whims of the higher ups.

Most likely, Richard Brave had gotten caught up in all that.

The spell he had spent his long life creating and perfecting and been held down by some unknown person and crushed.

Lævateinn symbolized Richard's life.

Denying the spell was the same as denying everything about the man.

No one would want that.

If Stiyl one day found himself stripped of every piece of magic he had and was thrown naked out into the world, he had no idea how he would survive.

But…

"So what?" said Stiyl scornfully.

There may have been some validity to what Richard was saying. He had once been a magician who worked on the defensive line over the Atlantic Ocean as a member of the Anglican Church's 0th Parish, Necessarius. By wielding Lævateinn or even a stronger spell, he might have been able to defeat many enemies and save many people. After Richard annihilated the Anglican Church, it was possible he would save more people than the entire Anglican Church could ever have hoped to. But he had killed Theodosia Electra. He had trampled on Patricia's heart. Stiyl was not about to overlook that. If Richard wanted what was "right", he would get it. The flame inside Stiyl's chest did not need to justify his actions in the name of justice before he carried out those actions.

Sparks flew through that nighttime park.

A light that did not come from the streetlights illuminated their faces.

"!!"

"!!"

There was no sign.

Their eyes met, their breathing synced up, and their intentions were known to each other.

That was all it took.

The true final confrontation began.

Stiyl's flame sword and Richard's Lævateinn clashed.

They repelled each other again and again, explosive flames enveloped them, and the battle began anew.

In that instant, Richard Brave felt something.

Unlike the "continuing" battling from before, he now felt as if the stopper of the bath drain had been pulled out. Both enemy and ally alike were being drawn in and swallowed up, whether they liked it or not. They were being carried away toward some definitive finale.

Richard grew afraid.

Stiyl did not.

(...!!)

Richard gritted his teeth and did not randomly charge forward. He fell back as if trying to free himself from a bog and swung Lævateinn once more. He did not use the vitamin B2. That spell would no longer have any effect on Stiyl and using it held the risk of creating an opening. However, he should not have any problems even with that secret technique sealed.

No matter how he thought about it, Stiyl had to have an overwhelmingly greater amount of damage. Both attack and defense started with Richard, so he just had to end it at the best possible time.

Stiyl would surely have realized what he was trying to do, but his body would not be able to keep up.

"Ohhh!!"

Richard shouted from the bottom of his gut and swung Lævateinn up from below like it was a golf club. He was aiming for the dirt in the ground. He tore up the dirt and transformed it into flames using the explosive force of Lævateinn, sending it all shooting toward Stiyl.

That was not enough to make Stiyl Magnus hesitate.

Richard knew that and that was why he charged into the center of the flames himself.

The two swords crossed blades.

Weapon clashed with weapon, sparks flew, and a heavy shock struck Richard's palms.

After an instantaneous pause, Stiyl's flame sword and Richard's Lævateinn turned around and let loose a second strike.

The roar of the air being sliced reverberated throughout the area.

"…"

"…"

Just before Stiyl's flame sword let loose its very strongest strike, it stopped at an awkward position. The tip of Richard's Lævateinn was pressed up against Stiyl's heart.

(I've won!!)

In a fight between good people, he might have put his sword down and spared the loser.

But no such rule existed among magicians.

After hearing enough of his opponent's pleading, he would mercilessly crush him.

Just as Richard's smile spread from within and reached his face…

"You should have realized it."

(…?)

"You should have realized what both of us being rune users meant."

Richard did not understand what Stiyl meant, but he was not one to give in.

He had no need to go along with Stiyl's attempt to buy time.

After breathing in a quick breath, Richard unhesitatingly sent a command to the blade pressed against Stiyl's chest.

An explosive flame danced out.

The sea of flames became a tsunami and lit up the night sky.

But it did not assault Stiyl Magnus.

The crimson flames roared as they consumed oxygen and wrapped around Richard Brave's right arm.

"Wha-…?"

The flames had come from Lævateinn. They had not gone in the direction they should have. Instead, they had headed straight for Richard as if attempting to swallow up their owner. Stiyl stood only a few millimeters from Lævateinn's tip, but he did not receive a single burn.

Richard felt no pain.

Just after he realized that, the intense pain finally caught up to him.

"Ghgaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaahhhhhhhhhhh!?"

The pain was so great he almost let go of Lævateinn, but he managed to hold on. That showed just how strong Richard's will was. His hand was starting to lose its proper shape due to the flames, but he kept it on Lævateinn's handle.

"Just as we can carve the runes for our rune magic, we also have spells in which the runes are dyed."

The flames continued.

Richard forced his almost completely melted fingers to move in order to finally let go of Lævateinn.

"The representative example of a rune carved on weapons is teiwaz. Its effects are increased when a slain enemy's blood runs through the grooves of the rune, dying it red."

Lævateinn fell to the ground.

Richard stepped back on shaking legs as if trying to distance himself from his weapon.

"That is why you should have been more cautious. When a fellow rune user like me read the runes carved into Lævateinn, you should have realized the danger of me *adding something to those runes that would work against you*."

"Adding something…?"

Richard held his burnt-black right arm and looked at his weapon that was still sending forth flames as it lay on the ground.

There was no change to the runes carved into the side of the blade.

However, when he looked closer, he noticed some opaque object stuck to its surface. It appeared to be some kind of viscous liquid and the smell of melted plastic floated in the air.

When Richard noticed that smell, he frowned.

“A laminated card…!!”

“It was the card used for the Opila spell. The people clearing spell you used probably used the same rune. Its original meaning was ‘land’. It held the meaning of preventing interference from an unwanted other party in a specified area you own.”

Richard’s expression grew even grimmer when he heard the term Opila.

Stiyl ignored it and continued his final words for the man.

“But the trick to runes is that a single rune can have many different meanings. Opila is used to mean something other than ‘land’. Specifically, ‘inheritance’. It can be used to set up your assets so they will be transferred to someone else.”

Richard’s breathing stopped.

(Shit. So he could do that…)

Richard gritted his teeth because he realized what Stiyl was getting at.

(But how could he come up with that in such a short amount of time…!?)

When he looked again, he could clearly see that a rune card was melted on Lævateinn’s surface. But even though the lamination had melted and the paper card within had turned to ash, the Opila rune stuck to the surface without disappearing. It was attached magically, ignoring the laws of physics. The Opila rune had already become deeply bonded to Lævateinn.

“The Opila rune attached to Lævateinn quickly took effect. Its effect was to distribute the ‘asset’ of the flames to another, but I was the one that carved the rune. Just as the deceased cannot receive the inheritance, the power of the runes could not be distributed to me no matter what. As a result, the Opila flames had to be sent to someone other than me.”

That said, it had really been 50/50 odds.

The spiritual item created from Lævateinn and the Opila rune could also be seen as belonging to Richard. If that had been the result, the flames would have enveloped Stiyl.

“Well, I’m not the Index Librorum Prohibitorum, so this kind of interference and interruption of spells isn’t likely to go so well most of the time. Against some other magician, this likely would not have worked. I could only do it because you are a fellow rune user,” Stiyl said disinterestedly before holding up his flame sword once more. He looked at Richard who had burned his right hand with his own weapon. “Magic is a world of thought, so application and flexibility influences everything. No single spell or spiritual item will allow you to win on every single battlefield.”

That statement displayed Stiyl’s fighting style as one who gained power via intelligence.

The true magician continued to speak as he ridiculed Richard who had lost in a battle of wits.

“Take your prized weapon.”

The flame sword pointed toward Lævateinn which was still producing flames.

Sweat flowed from Richard’s body and Stiyl mercilessly spoke.

“If it really is as great as you claim, then use it to defeat me now. If you truly think you can justify killing Theodosia and trampling on Patricia, then do so here and now.”

Stiyl’s words belied his true intentions.

He only told Richard to do so because he was convinced he could not.

“…!!”

And just as Stiyl had predicted, Richard moved backwards.

He tried to get as far away as possible from the object that had been the sole support for his pride.

Stiyl did not pursue him.

He did not even do that.

A tremendous roar could be heard.

Stiyl Magnus’s flame sword exploded and the shockwave assaulted the night.

He had trusted in Lævateinn so much up until then. Without that support, Richard Brave flew through the air to a humorous extent. After flying a few meters, he bounced off the ground two or three times before hitting the trunk of a tree that had escaped the blaze.

“…Hmph,” said Stiyl amid the silent nighttime park that was still burning in places.

Pain assaulted him all across his body, but he could not rest yet.

(The people clearing field is gone…)

That spell that ensured that normal people did not approach the area had been set up by Richard for fun. Now that the man had lost his power, the remains of the fires would be visible even from afar. Stiyl could have activated a people clearing spell just as Richard had, but…

(We may have overdone things. Setting up a people clearing field over such a large area would be a pain.)

The effects of Stiyl's runes were activated when he set up the cards. He could do so instantly if it just had to be directly around him, but he would have to set up runes over the entire park if he wanted the effects to cover the entire area.

Even so, he would normally have used runes that would automatically send out the other runes to set them up in a short period of time, but he did not want to waste the extra effort after the intense battles he had gone through.

That meant…

(It would be best to get out of here as quickly as possible.)

He would meet up with Patricia and retrieve the Alaskan rune fragment. Depending on the situation, he might have to bargain with the Anglican Church or the Dawn-Colored Sunlight.

(Where is she?)

Stiyl moved his gaze from Richard and looked around in the darkness. He had succeeded in eliminating the threat of Richard Brave, but the entire incident was not yet resolved. Patricia Birdway had lived a life with no connection to fights to the death and yet she had suddenly been thrown into the middle a battle between expert magicians. She would have to overcome her mental scars with her own strength.

(I could help "remove" some of that using the magical plants or suggestions used in the focusing methods for ceremonies, but I'm hesitant to say that's the best method.)

Suddenly, he noticed something moving on the edge of his vision.

It was Richard Brave who had been blown away by the shockwave.

"…You naïve fool. As a magician, you should know better than to relax before you have killed your enemy."

“Make no mistake,” Stiyl said in a stiff voice. “You are going to be transported to London. The inquisition awaits you there and that is a fate worse than death. I’m sure you know that the Anglican Church is at the forefront of witch hunting.”

“I see… But you are still naïve.”

Something was off about Richard’s breathing.

He may have had a broken bone or one of his internal organs may have been injured.

Even so, he smiled.

“And I’m sorry to say, I made sure to have some insurance ready.”

“…”

Stiyl started controlling his breathing once more and then focused on his surroundings.

He quickly understood what Richard meant.

He noticed some presences.

He sensed the presences of a large number of people coming through the gaps between the trees about 100 meters away from the burned away spot he stood in. He also detected many masses of magical power. The people were clearly magicians and they each had different kinds of spiritual items.

“Did the communications official not tell you that an Anglican unit was headed here?”

A group of magicians approached in a horizontal line.

They numbered somewhere between 30 and 40.

Even though they were from the Anglican Church, they were not there on an official mission. Those magicians either agreed with Richard or at least would profit from what he was trying to do, so they too were trying to gain the techniques of the Dvergr.

“They are weaker than me. I headed in first as the strongest of us in order to minimize our losses. But I wonder if you have the strength to deal with all of them? With all the damage you have taken, can you deal with them while also protecting Patricia, wherever she is?”

The group most likely specialized in Norse spells, but other than that, their details were unknown.

Stiyl did not have time to do a detailed analysis of their spells as he had for Richard. And the rules for a one-on-one battle were different than those for a group battle. At the current rate, he would be swallowed up by the group and killed before he could even attack properly.

“They will pay no heed to a loser like me. After all, they are expert magicians who show mercy by killing you. They may even go out of their way to kill me in order to lessen their own burden. As I said, you are naïve. You should not have relaxed your guard until your enemy was dead.”

Stiyl heard a sound like a neon sign being turned off.

In the darkness beyond the trees, lights glowed. It was not just a few. Stiyl saw 30 or 40 pale lights appear one after another and his throat dried up.

The lights were…

(Runes… And that’s the 33 character United Kingdom style!!)

He did not even have time to think after that.

Explosive noises reverberated through the night.

An ice blade approached seeming to crawl across the ground. A flash of lightning approached in a broad arc like a long throw in baseball. A mass of flames approached in a straight line.

Stiyl immediately tried to get behind cover, but then a large number of beams of light shot through the night sky. He somehow managed to avoid a direct hit, but the dirt and rocks at his feet blew up at him. His body was sent flying through the air.

Stiyl managed to brace himself against his landing, rolled along the ground, and stood up once more.

“Richard!!” he cried.

His only response was the continued bombardment.

His vision was cut off by flames and smoke, so he could not tell where his enemies were. However, he doubted those magicians had come to allow Richard to escape. He would probably be blown away along with their target or even taken out first so that he would not tell anyone anything unnecessary.

(Dammit… Is Patricia okay? Where is she?)

But if they wanted the techniques of the Dvergr as Richard did, they would not get Patricia involved. They would not carry out such an indiscriminate attack.

That meant…

(They only came here because they noticed Richard and me fighting. Or maybe Richard sent out some kind of signal when he was defeated. At any rate, they were focused on us and did not notice everything. That means they likely still haven't found Patricia!!)

He wanted to believe that was the case.

He wanted to determine that she was safe, but he gritted his teeth because he had no proof.

But his opponents would not wait.

Many beams of light glittered in the night sky.

Just as he noticed them, three beams of light mercilessly pierced through Stiyl's chest.

"Hh!!"

After being pierced, Stiyl disappeared into thin air.

A sound like a curtain beating the air could be heard. Stiyl then reappeared in a different place. He had used a mirage to hide his position.

The enemy's attacks had no magical tracking ability.

Just like with a normal gun, they had to be aimed by hand.

(No matter how many enemies there are, what I must do remains the same.)

As his shoulders moved up and down with his heavy breathing, Stiyl poured strength into his legs that threatened to tremble due to exhaustion and stared straight ahead.

He checked on the situation and then pulled a new rune card from his pocket. This rune was used for searching rather than attacking. He had no convenient means of finding Patricia's location, but he could search for the magic power of the Alaskan rune fragment that had fallen next to her.

(I *will* bring Patricia Birdway back to the world she came from. I don't care about the Anglican Church or the Dawn-Colored Sunlight. She isn't a magician, so she shouldn't be bound by their rules!!)

Multiple magical attacks assaulted him at the same time.

Flames rose, ice spears rained down, and lightning strikes split the night sky.

Stiyl ran and ran in order to gain some distance. He did not care how unsightly it made him look. He did not need to defeat all of his enemies. Stiyl Magnus only saw one thing he had to do in order to win.

(How long can I last…?)

Facing them all head on would have been reckless.

What was most important was getting Patricia to safety as quickly as possible.

Should he try to meet up with her as soon as possible in order to protect her?

Or should he purposefully distance himself from her in order to draw the enemies away from her?

He did not even need to think about it.

(I don't think they know where Patricia is, so I can lure them away. Right now, I need to get away from Patricia, giving her safety priority. Patricia has to have taken quite a bit of damage both physically and mentally. I can't bring her to an even harsher environment!!)

But the number of long distance magical attacks grew.

They seemed to have determined that they might lose track of Stiyl if they let him use his mirages. They were trying to crush him before that could happen.

Many runes glowed.

An overwhelming rain of light covered the night sky.

There was a limit to what he could avoid using a mirage. More importantly, when they were attacking an entire area rather than specifically aiming for him, a mirage that messed up their aim was pointless.

"Kh!!"

He knew he was cornered, but Stiyl had no choice but to use a mirage.

He knew he was heading toward a dead end, but Stiyl saw no other path he could take.

Meanwhile, the points of light covering the sky started raining down.

Suddenly, a pure white beam of light tore through the night.

At first, Stiyl did not know what it was, but an instant later, he realized it had been created by magic. The pure white explosion in a point in the sky caused the countless magical attacks to prematurely detonate in midair. Rather than a defensive wall, it seemed to be a purely offense attack that had sealed the other magicians' resistance.

It was some kind of magical attack.

But Stiyl had not fired it, Richard had not fired it, and the pursuing unit had not fired it.

(Where did it come from…!?)

Stiyl pulled out a rune card to create a mirage and hid behind a large tree just to be sure, but then he heard an unexpected voice.

"Wow, wow. Things seem to have gotten rather rough out here. I'm impressed you've managed to last this long. These reinforcement were only able to pull that off because you drew the enemy out, Stiyl."

That ridiculous manner of speaking.

That voice of a mother just under 40.

"Theo…dosia?" he said dumbfounded.

He had no idea when or how she had retrieved the girl, but Patricia lay unconscious in her arms. Patricia may have fainted once Stiyl and Richard had left.

Behind Theodosia, he sensed a number of human presences.

They must have been the "reinforcements" who had created the explosion.

As Theodosia cradled Patricia in her arms like a small child, she smiled at Stiyl.

"Hi, Stiyl. Heh heh heh. The strongest character doesn't show up until the very, very end. Because Lævateinn burns away everything equally, it was simple to pretend to get burned away but actually go into hidin-gbfh!?"

"Sorry about that. I have no idea where that punch came from. It's a complete mystery to me, but these punches just won't stop coming. What do you think I should do?"

"O-obh!? Bhehah!! N-not good. I'm holding Patricia in my arms, so I can't guar-gbh!? I've been meaning to tell you, Stiyl. You need to take off your rings before you punch peopl-gbheh!!"

(But who are these reinforcements…?)

Stiyl had been letting his fists fly with a rune card unintentionally crushed within one of them, but then he frowned.

If they were on Theodosia's side, people from the Anglican HQ were the first to come to mind, but the timing was simply too good for that. In fact, they would never have made it in time.

Then who was it?

A voice spoke up as if to answer Stiyl's question.

"Heh. It seems you helped my little sister out some," said a voice similar to Patricia Birdway's. However, the emotions held in this voice were completely different. "The Anglican Church specializes in witch hunts and the inquisition, so I normally have no obligation to mediate a conflict within it, but I had no choice here. I hate owing anyone anything, so I decided to thank you for what you did for my little sister."

"The Dawn-Colored Sunlight…!?"

The magic cabal's boss.

She was Patricia's sister, so her last name must have been Birdway.

Paying no heed to Stiyl's shock, the girl held her right hand out toward empty space. A nearby man silently held something out. The motion was so natural that it made it seem as if the man had not been waiting there and had instead appeared at her side that very instant.

Richard's unit was frantically preparing a second wave after their magical attacks had been suddenly intercepted in midair. Birdway spoke to Stiyl while staring at her enemies from afar.

"I don't like modern guns, but the flintlock ones are a different matter."

A smile filled with sadism covered Birdway's face.

It was an expression one would never see on Patricia's face.

"But even they can't stand up to a staff. Just running my finger along it almost makes me drool."

The sound like a vibrating wind roared out.

Stiyl realized Birdway had begun using magic.

A staff or wand.

That was the symbolic weapon of modern Western Golden-style magic. It would use the element of fire. Its coloration would be red. Its alignment would be right. The quality of the Telesma called forth and used would be that of Michael.

“Do you know what our field of expertise is?”

“As a Golden-style magic cabal, I would assume various ceremonies derived from the acquisition of Telesma.”

Many different types of magic could be referred to as “Golden-style”, but the Dawn-Colored Sunlight was a group that specialized in large techniques that tended to use large-scale spiritual items to create large-scale effects.

“But you don’t have time to construct a temple here and I would have detected it if you had set up the appropriate symbols around the park in order to construct a large-scale ceremonial grounds. Or are you asking me to buy you some time?”

“It’s true we don’t have time for a proper ceremony. Norse spells, especially the ones using weapons with runes carved into them, are used by having each individual create individual pieces of magic. On the other hand, our magic within the Dawn-Colored Sunlight mostly requires the entire group to act in unison to create a single, large-scale spell.”

Birdway held the staff in one hand and stared down its end as if taking general aim.

“It’s merely an issue of speed. There are all sorts of differences between a single person heading up a flight of stairs and a hundred thousand people heading up a flight of stairs at the same time. When a large power is being used by a large number of people, the coordination needed gets a bit tricky. And of course, that has an effect on how quickly each individual spell is completed,” Birdway said disinterestedly. “But you can’t call yourself a magic cabal if you can’t defeat some small fries like this.”

Just as Stiyl was wondering if she was done speaking or not, a great noise exploded out.

He had not understood. The enemy group called in by Richard Brave that should have stood before Stiyl was suddenly thrown into the air by a dome-shaped explosion of light.

The unit desperately tried to counterattack, but Birdway did not let them.

After a few more explosions of light, most of the enemy force had been wiped out. Hiding behind trees or small buildings gained them nothing. Birdway’s magic blew them away along with their cover.

“In a Golden-style ceremony, a temple is created following set laws and the quality, element, and directionality of the power being used is decided on. Once that is done, Hebrew letters are used to provide imaginative power and a temporary guardian that possesses Telesma is prepared. …It’s true that we would not make it in time if we had to construct the temple from the ground up.”

With most of their comrades gone, the remaining enemies ran about in confusion. They were picked off by even more explosions.

Even when they dropped their weapons and stood stock still in shock, Birdway mercilessly blew them away.

“But temples and ceremonial grounds have only become so complex and precise because people want as much power as they can get. It’s the same as sticking a steam engine into something that was originally moved using human power. After all, if god and the angels existed before humans were born, then the constructions and ceremonies created by humans can’t possibly be absolutely necessary.”

They used enormous pieces of magic that were carried out with accurate intuition and measurements made by eye rather than relying on accurate theories and calculations.

To put it bluntly, she looked like a skilled stage actress.

She had cast aside the perfectly prepared script and had instead used her instinct and sharp eye to see what the audience wanted. Based on that, she had continually minutely adjusted her performance on the stage and was now receiving great applause.

“If you take out a lot of the effort used in constructing a temple, you can activate your spells more quickly. Of course, this lowers their power. I’ve arbitrarily named it a summoned explosion, but I don’t have any special spell for it.”

It was no longer a fight.

It was nothing more than a bullying of the weak that was painful to watch.

“And then there’s the whole issue of attack magic. I think it’s too close minded to think of each spell as having only one use. Why even use magic that was only made to be used in some childish fight? That kind of junk should just be left as an opening act. I don’t see anything worth praising about how you prepare all these wonderful pieces of magic for your enemies.”

Her words sent a chill down his spine.

She was the boss who held the Dawn-Colored Sunlight in her hands.

The next thing Stiyl knew, there were no enemies left.

It made Stiyl feel like the life-and-death battles he had been fighting had been nothing more than fist fights between children. On the other hand, what that girl had done had been to tear up the very ground the enemies stood upon.

She was ruthless.

She was unreasonable.

She was overwhelming.

After creating that scene of devastation, Birdway handed her staff to the man waiting beside her and cracked her neck.

She then suddenly looked to the side.

Stiyl had not noticed his approach, but one of Birdway's subordinates was standing there silently. He held an unconscious magician over his shoulder as if the magician were a piece of luggage.

"I have retrieved the fragment of the Alaskan rune epitaph and Richard Brave, the man behind all this."

"I see," replied Birdway.

Stiyl frowned suspiciously.

"…Are you saying you saved him? That doesn't sound like the Dawn-Colored Sunlight I've heard about."

"Make no mistake."

The girl grinned at the question.

Her expression seemed to be the incarnation of sadism itself.

"We must give the appropriate punishment to those who bare their fangs toward us. That has always been our way of doing things. So, I'm sorry to say we have no intention of handing this man over to you. He is ours to enjoy."

A freezing chill ran down Stiyl's back.

Birdway must have been satisfied with his expression because a slight smile of joy appeared on her face. She then sent a few more explosions across the unmoving battlefield…or rather, bombing site.

After sending explosions across the entire area, she muttered, “Let’s get going.”

She then turned her back on the defeated enemies who she held no more interest in.

No one spoke a word.

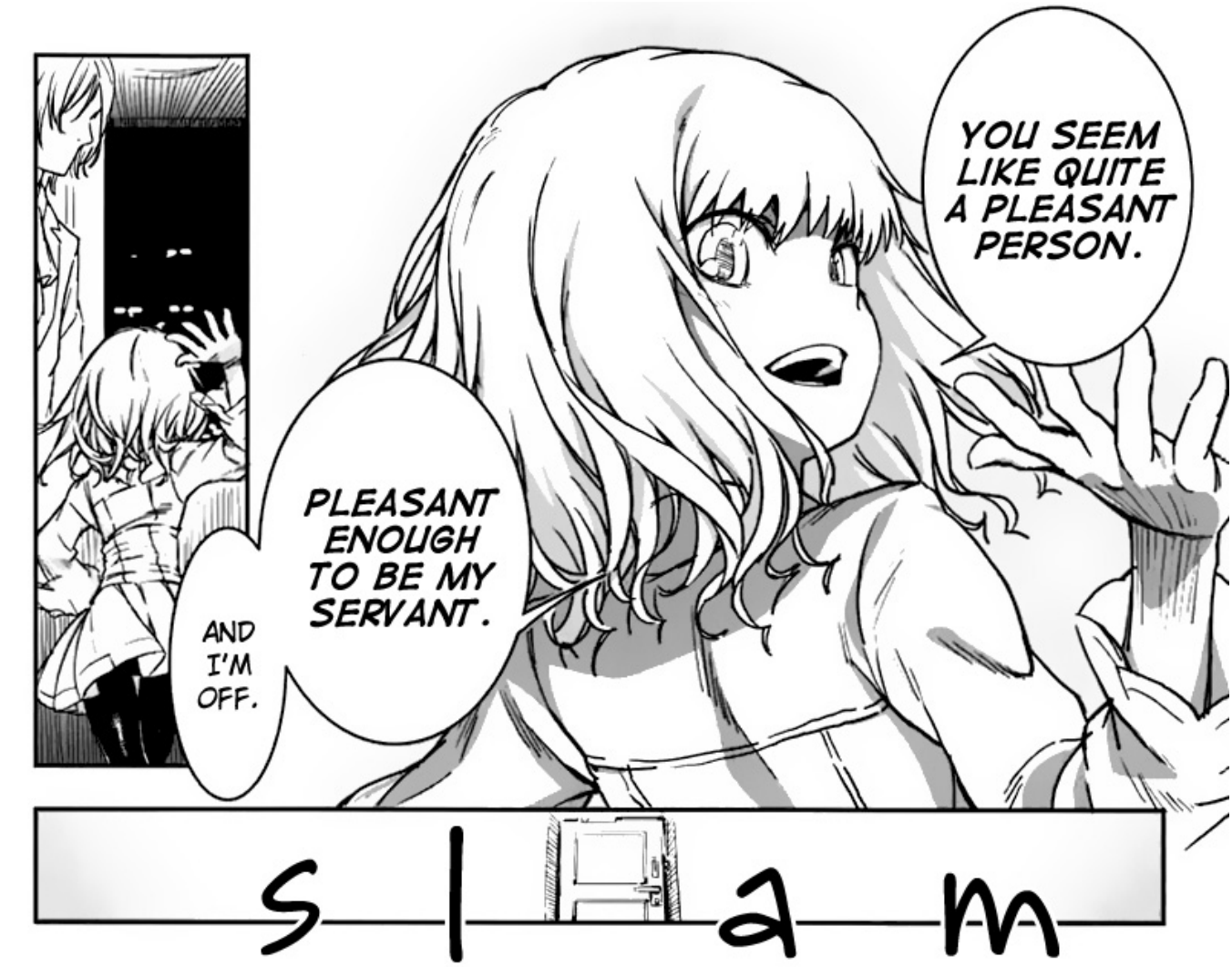
No one was even able to prepare any kind of objection.

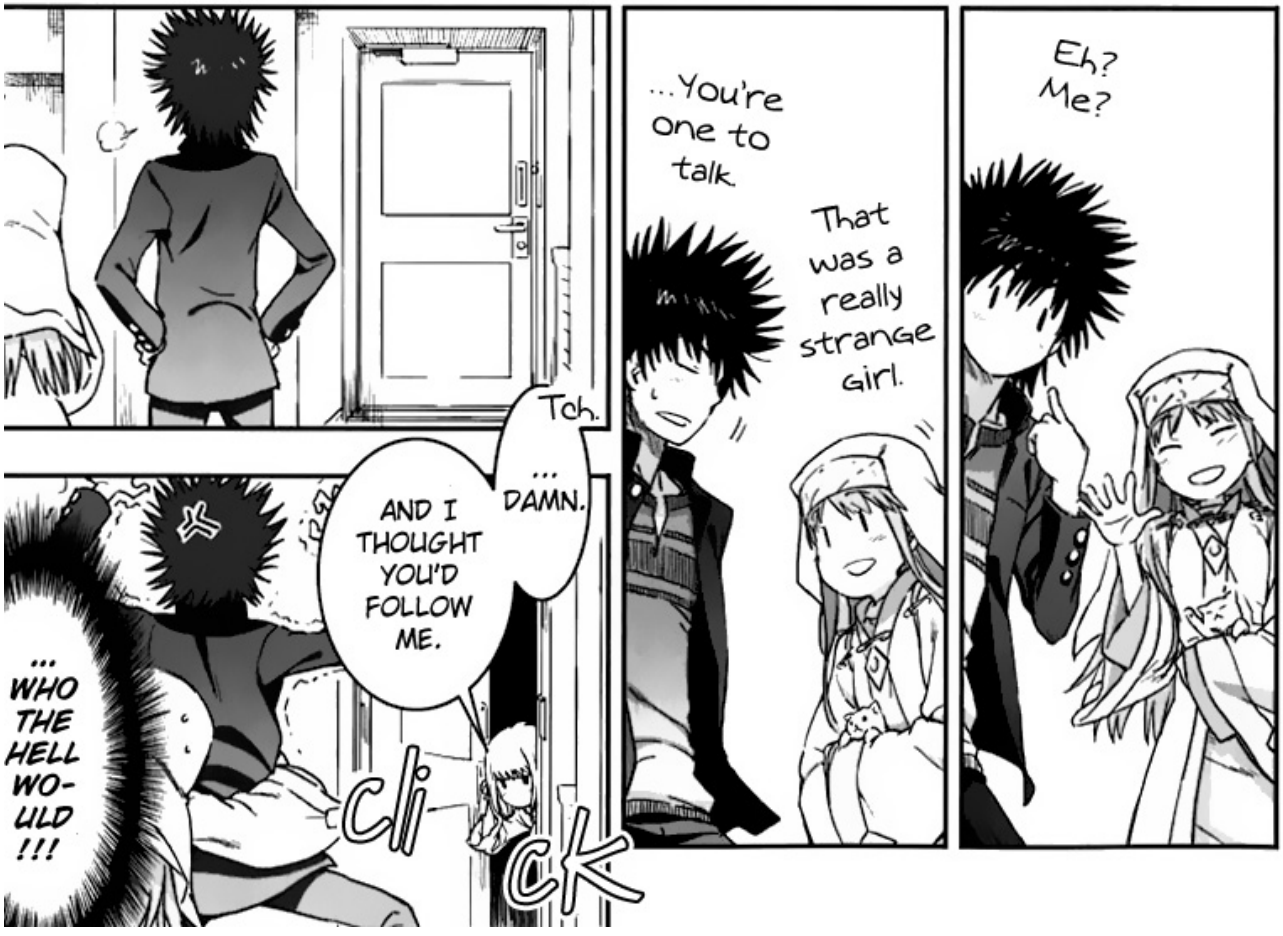
Birdway had silenced everyone with her overwhelming display of destruction.

“This pointless work really wears me out. I could really go for a popsicle,” she said languidly.

OH...
WELL, THE MAIN FORCE ACTUALLY WENT AHEAD AND RECOVERED IT BEFORE YOU.
BASICALLY, I HAD YOU ATTACK THE TARGET ONCE MORE AFTER IT HAD ALREADY BEEN WEAKENED.
OR MAYBE YOU COULD SAY I SENT YOU TO PEEK INSIDE A BEEHIVE AFTER SOMEONE ELSE HAD BEEN POKING AT IT.
Triumphant
AND...
I THEN LEARNED HOW TO CONTROL THIS THING FROM HER.
SO, ANYWAY ...
IT LOOKS LIKE THE TWO OF YOU MANAGED TO AVOID TAKING ANY DAMAGE OR MAKING ANY SACRIFICES.
I'D SAY THAT'S SOMETHING TO BE PROUD OF.
Don't you think?
clap
clap

?
WELL, DON'T GET SO DOWN.
YOU DID PLAY THE IMPORTANT ROLE OF THE DECOY.
...
WHAT'S WITH THOSE STUPID LOOKS?
Yeah, you were right ...
See? I told you we couldn't trust her.
Now then...
OUR OBJECTIVE HERE HAS BEEN ACHIEVED.
ARE YOU STILL PLANNING TO MAKE US DO SOMETHING?
WE HAVE NO REASON TO STAY IN THIS CITY ANY LONGER.
I do have some minor business left, though.
Ah.
I SEE.
THEN COULD YOU JUST LEAVE ALREADY?
Don't be so rude to our guests!
OH.
ONE MORE THING.
click


YOU SEEM LIKE QUITE A PLEASANT PERSON.
PLEASANT ENOUGH TO BE MY SERVANT.
AND I'M OFF.
SLAM


Eh? Me?
...You're one to talk.
That was a really strange girl.
Tch.
... DAMN.
AND I THOUGHT YOU'D FOLLOW ME.
... WHO THE HELL WO-ULD !!!
Cli CK

Part 6

A certain thing always seemed to exist within an international airport and the international airport in Academy City's District 23 was no exception.

That thing was a duty-free shop.

"…With color printers you really can't beat the Japanese ones," said Stiyl Magnus in shock as he looked at the specs given next to the price.

The pale gradient display was not bad at all. He had never thought the sparkling of the scales of a tropical butterfly's wings could be printed.

(With this level of expression on my side, I might be able to use even that symbol… The time may have come for me to construct some new rune cards. I know. Maybe I should try making some long distance attacks.)

He did not notice, but a creepy smile appeared on his face.

Seeing that, a wondering expression came to Theodosia's face.

"Why are you carrying a bunch of the exact same type of ink cartridge you usually buy online?"

"…"

Foreign tourists had a tendency to see the Japanese-made office electronics in the duty-free shop and end up buying them. They knew they would later realize the products were not really all that great and regret buying them, but they were sucked in regardless. Even if they were told that there were other more Japanese places they could be going to, Mt. Fuji would still be a pain in the ass to climb.

Holding his shopping basket filled with products, Stiyl said, "I guess the Dawn-Colored Sunlight is heading out about now."

"Are you sure we shouldn't go see them off?"

"You do realize we are part of Necessarius, the group that destroys magic cabals like them, right? Why would we go see our enemies off? I hate having to say it, but we could very well be having a fight to the death with them right now if it hadn't been for Richard Brave making a mess of things."

"It seems there is a faction within the Anglican Church that thinks we should join forces with some of the more skilled magic cabals. Do you really have no intention of getting along?"

“That’s an issue for the higher-ranking members of Necessarius,” Stiyl said with a sigh. “I rescued Patricia Birdway because she is a normal person with no connection to the Dawn-Colored Sunlight. She should not have been forced into a clash between magic forces. If she had been acting as a member of the Dawn-Colored Sunlight, we would have had to see her as an enemy.”

“…”

“Her sister is a perfect example. Those sisters started off the same, but one ended up involved with magic while the other didn’t. Patricia is one thing, but unfortunately, I will never cooperate with the older sister that rules the cabal. What was with her anyway? She’s creepy, condescending, violent, and shows no sign of treating other people like human beings.”

“Oh? Well, isn’t that a shame.”

“!?”

Stiyl immediately turned around toward the girl’s voice that had suddenly come from behind him.

“Your threats lose all weight when you give them holding a shopping basket.”

She was the boss of the Dawn-Colored Sunlight.

Stiyl’s eyes narrowed, but she just continued speaking calmly.

“Oh, make no mistake. I didn’t come here to crush you.”

She had a youthful appearance, but she had the strength to singlehandedly defeat a unit of expert magicians and yawn about it. A cruel grin appeared on Birdway’s face as she grabbed the shoulders of a girl with the exact same face from behind. She then pushed the other girl forward. Patricia seemed oddly stiff and Birdway grinned from behind her.

“My little sister seems to want to thank you before she leaves the country. Hm? I take it you’re the type that’s more interested in little sisters than big sisters.”

“…”

Stiyl fell silent as a great number of customers passed by within the duty-free shop.

Birdway continued pushing Patricia forward.

“What’s with that look? Don’t tell me you’re going to refuse a request from a normal person. Well, I personally don’t care if you do, but my sister is quite the crybaby. She can really cry when she gets going. You should have seen her a bit ago when she tripped and her ass landed straight in a puddle. Her panties were soaking wet.”

“I-I wasn’t crying!! And I’m not a crybaby!!”

Patricia started objecting and her face grew red, but her sister held onto her shoulders too tightly for her to turn around. Stiyl felt he had a pretty good grasp of who held the power in that relationship.

Birdway must have gotten carried away due to Patricia being unable to see her because a dark smile spread across her face that befitted the leader of an evil organization.

“And so my little sister here is about to give her one and only first confession. This will be quite a bitter experience for me as her older sister, so she should be thankful I’m letting her.”

“Bfgeh!?”

Patricia started coughing with an expression Stiyl had never seen before. Birdway started laughing, but then Theodosia spoke up.

“Birdway, by any chance, do you not want your younger sister to get ahead of you in life-dgbh!?”

“That isn’t it. Don’t worry. That simply isn’t it at all.”

“I-I think I was just casually hit by an assassination magic attack that is made to be unanalyzable so as to leave no evidence…”

“U-um!! It seems the conversation has turned toward me confessing, but that isn’t what I want to say!!”

They all seemed to say, “Then what is it?” as they turned toward Patricia and she winced. Birdway then started pressing her sister further while holding her shoulders firmly in place.

“In other words, you’re going to be making some announcement with even more impact than your one and only first confession?”

“Uuh…”

“If you now come out and say something dull, these magicians are sure to be disappointed in you. Simply put, they will refuse to even stick their legs under the same kotatsu as you.”

“Waaaaaahhhhhhhhhh!! Now that-…Now that you’ve built it up to the point that it sounds like I’m going to be saying the most interesting thing the universe, there’s no way I can say anything!!”

With the pressure of expectation coming from all sides, Patricia lost it and ran from the duty-free shop with teary eyes. Theodosia reacted quickest as she had kids of her own and frantically chased after her.

(Huh. She really is a crybaby.)

"…Y'know, I'm surprised someone from the Dawn-Colored Sunlight knows about the Japanese kotatsu."

"Japanese appliances really are the best. If I had a kotatsu, I'd probably never get out from under it."

With timing that confused Stiyl, a sinister smile spread across Birdway's face.

Once Patricia was gone, Stiyl's expression changed.

"*So what do you really want*?"

"Oh, that's quite a change now that my sister's left. I guess you really are the little sister type."

"Please don't say things that will cause misunderstandings. If Patricia needed something, you could have given her a few guards. There was no need for the boss of the cabal to go along."

"Heh."

Unlike Stiyl, Birdway was still grinning.

"This is just a bit of thanks."

"?"

"I'm not the one that wants to know something. I deduced that there were things you would want to know, so I came by. Normally, I would have no obligation to do this, but you did look after my little sister."

"What are you talking about?" Stiyl's expression grew suspicious. "What are you saying I want to know?"

"The whereabouts of the Donati Horoscope."

Tension mixed in with Stiyl's thoughts.

When Stiyl had arrived at the transport vehicle, someone had already stolen the horoscope and Richard Brave had not seemed to know where it was. So who had attacked the transport vehicle?

“Or maybe what we plan to do with the horoscope. Do either of those interest you?”

“…”

Stiyl glanced around the area.

It was possible the store would become a battlefield. He started calculating out the best places for rune cards and how many of the normal people he could get to evacuate using a people clearing spell, but…

“Don’t go on guard like that,” Birdway said cheerfully. “We aren’t planning on doing much of anything with the Donati Horoscope or the epitaph fragment. We have no interest in Norse mythology at all. The techniques of the Dvergr would be of no use to us even if we had them.”

“…Do you really think I’ll believe that?”

“Allow me to teach you one truth,” said Birdway as if it was nothing of significance. “The Donati Horoscope originally belonged to us. We purposefully allowed Academy City to find it and recover it.”

“What…?”

“To obtain the techniques of the Dvergr you need the Donati Horoscope, the epitaph fragment, and someone from my family. We had all three from the beginning. If we were planning to carry out the ceremony, we would have already done so.”

“Then why did you let it go?”

“Because we didn’t need it. What other reason could we have?” Birdway replied immediately.

She easily denied the Dvergr techniques that Stiyl and Richard had been fighting so desperately over.

“In fact, excavating the techniques of the Dvergr would just invite in unnecessary chaos. We wanted to seal them away if possible. We were thinking of splitting the three pieces up and sending them each to some place where no magic cabal could get their hands on them.”

“Then you should have just sent it to the British Museum. There was no need to send it off to the science side.”

“But there were some who were after it within the Anglican Church and you are the ones that manage the magical items there.”

“…”

Stiyl fell silent, but Birdway showed no sign of caring despite the fact that she could be seen as being one of the "victims" of the incident. To her, it had all been nothing more than a bit of "trouble".

"We thought that sending the horoscope to the headquarters of the science side would be best because it would get the best care in a world that had no idea what its magical value was. …But Academy City turned out to be a surprisingly bad choice. We determined we couldn't leave it here, so we came to retrieve it."

Stiyl looked back at Birdway's face.

His look was really nothing but a glare, but Birdway paid him no heed.

"You don't believe me?" she asked.

"…Of course I don't," spat out Stiyl. "No matter what you say, the Dvergr techniques are still quite powerful. I see no reason why you would go out of your way to throw away something like that. Keeping every advantage you can is how proper magic cabals think."

"Proper magic cabals, hm?" repeated Birdway with a smile as if carefully going over Stiyl's words.

Unlike before, her smile seemed to roll naturally from her mouth.

"What?"

"It seems you're a bit mistaken about the Dawn-Colored Sunlight. I have no obligation to explain all this and my thanks for saving my little sister is running dry, but what the hell. I'll give you just a bit more, free of charge."

After a pause, Birdway continued.

"First of all, the Dawn-Colored Sunlight is not a magic cabal."

Stiyl Magnus froze in place at that casual statement.

What had she just said?

The Dawn-Colored Sunlight was one of the leading magic cabals even within the great magic country of England.

He thought he had misheard her, but Birdway's tone did not change.

"I'm not kidding. It may be acting a lot like a magic cabal right now, but if you go back far enough, you'll find that we are constructed entirely differently from the organizations that are devoted to a set denomination or sect."

Birdway's tone grew calmer.

It reminded Stiyl of the tone of someone giving priority to spreading their knowledge.

"In the Dawn-Colored Sunlight, there is no magic or science."

"…Are you serious?" Stiyl said as a few customers passed by.

"To be more accurate, we are an old organization that has existed from an age before there was a distinction between magic and science. It was around the 18th century that natural science was developed and a line was drawn between academia and religion. Most formal organizations are older than that."

She was right, but there was still a tacit understanding that modern organizations were either on the magic side or the science side. And the world was not kind to those who broke that unwritten rule.

"The name 'Dawn-Colored Sunlight' was not added on until later. Even I don't know what its original name was and I'm the organization's boss, but it seems the organization was established with the goal of investigating those who stand above others."

"Investigating those who stand above others?"

"You could say that we are an organization that looks into the actions and abilities of certain types of charismatic people. To put it simply, we are trying to understand what requirements are needed to be a leader so we can make a manual for it and just follow a flowchart that lets us seize control of any nation or group. Basically, it's a type of world domination," Birdway said with a sneer. "Doesn't it almost make you laugh how it sounds like the goal of some evil organization? By the way, the line between science and magic has become rather vague in Europe of late. Most of the leaders have some connection to religious power, symbols, or legends. When you investigate it deep enough, you realize that the organizations have all become tilted in an occult direction at some point."

Birdway paused for a second.

"Something conclusive happened in the latter half of the 19th century. The world's largest magic cabal, a group known as the Golden cabal, appeared within England. Almost all of the charismatic magicians in Europe gathered in one group. It was almost a miraculous group from the point of view of an organization that wanted to investigate the type of people that stand above others. Of course, we ended up investigating them. And we did so by joining them."

"…And so you became dyed in their colors?"

“They pulled us from the proper course. Charismatic people have a type of attraction to them. As an organization that had investigated those who stand above others for many years, we had supposedly gained a sort of resistance to that, but the entire organization was swallowed whole.”

That was when the organization became the Dawn-Colored Sunlight.

The organization was not supposed to have either magic or science within it, but it had been pulled fully over to the magic side.

(…)

Stiyl was reminded of Richard Brave. That magician had been shaken and destroyed within that gap between magic and science. Given that, it may have been for the best that the Dawn-Colored Sunlight had tilted in the direction of being a magic cabal. Not joining either side may have made both sides their enemy.

(It was after the collapse of the Golden cabal that the science side was reorganized with the establishment of Academy City and the treaty with the magic side was formed. All of that may have worked toward saving the Dawn-Colored Sunlight.)

“So you understand now, right?”

“Understand what?”

“Our goal is to seize the position at the top of the already existing society. The techniques of the Dvergr would destroy the current society and create a new order. We wish for a more crass and practical method of domination, so that is too roundabout a method for us. There is no guarantee the new society would be a convenient one for our purposes and it simply would not be worth controlling.”

She seemed to be saying she wanted a tidy place to control.

Stiyl felt it was like a type of arrogant pacifism.

“Our ultimate goal is to control and rule everything regardless of whether it is of magic or science. As such, it would be a problem to tilt the balance too far in either direction. For that reason, the techniques of the Dvergr simply have too much weight. With them, the Dawn-Colored Sunlight would become nothing more than a magic cabal.”

“…Are you trying to remove the poison?” Stiyl said scornfully.

After all that, he was finally able to refuse to admit defeat and make a rebuttal.

“You can’t. As a magician, I know. Anyone who knows even a bit about magic or establishes their place in the world using magic can’t rid themselves of it. Once the scales tip, they can’t be brought back.”

“True,” Birdway quickly agreed. “And it may be best for the world if that holds and we can never become anything more than a magic cabal.”

“…”

“But society will move on regardless of what we want. And it will bring us along with it. At some point in the future, we will overcome the framework of a mere magic cabal. When that happens and we or our descendants have regained the original power the organization was established with, who knows what will happen.”

A hint of loneliness could be heard in her voice.

However, the evil grin on her face made one suspect they were just imagining things.

Some change must have come over Stiyl because the type of grin on Birdway’s face changed when she looked at him.

“Well, there’s no reason to become pessimistic. We may merely lose our individuality, lose the ability to hold together as an organization, and simply collapse.”

“What about Patricia…?” said Stiyl cutting in for the first time. They had exchanged words, but he felt that was the first time he had actually cut in. “Is Patricia Birdway some kind of guidepost?”

“Perhaps. She is a normal person who is not part of the science side or the magic side. She does not rely on either side’s power and lives her life as a completely normal person. Well, I suppose my desire is to bring the organization to a halt once it regains its original form. …There is a possibility that both the science side and the magic side will not allow such an organization to exist. Although, I doubt all of the organization’s members will approve of my desire.”

What was the proper word to describe the expression on Birdway’s face there?

It was true that Patricia had been given the epitaph fragment on her orders, but not even Birdway herself must have known the true reason behind that decision. The interests of the organization and her personal feelings were intertwined complexly.

Suddenly, Birdway’s smile grew fully evil once more.

“At any rate…”

“?”

“My sister Patricia and I are the same type of person. I am not satisfied with being the boss of a magic cabal. I am a cute girl that courageously wants to cast all that aside and try to somehow bring the organization to a halt as a normal person. Shouldn’t you be speaking to me a bit more politely?”

"…I see the boss of the Dawn-Colored Sunlight has a terrible sense of humor. That would have quite a bit of impact in high society."

"Don't be so stingy. One way of looking at things says you held my little sister's hand and escorted her through the city at night while you cheered each other on."

"That damn brat!! Is that what she told you…!?"

"In fact, she came to me and proudly bragged about it. It doesn't bother me at all, but how about you treat her a little more gentlemanly in the future if the situation should ever arise again."

"Do you have to speak down to people no matter what you talk about?"

"Tch. I had a feeling you wouldn't. Well, whatever. Due to some hot-headed idiot, I was carried in someone's arms like a princess for the first time in my life, so I guess I'll use that to lord it over my little sister on the plane ride home."

Stiyl frowned at the term "hot-headed idiot".

The face he least wanted to recall in the world came unbidden to mind.

"By any chance, did this hot-headed idiot have spiky black hair?"

"Oh, do you know him? He kept going on about misfortune, so I decided to show him a thing or two about real misfortune. He turned out to be pretty tough and he's fun to play with."

(Now that damn hot-headed idiot has made another connection to some strange part of the world!?)

As one whose job was to see to the safety of the magic industry, Stiyl almost brought his hands to his head.

Birdway waved her hand around.

"Now then. I need to be going."

"I see."

"I'll leave you with one last comment," she said as she turned her back on him. "We do not want the techniques of the Dvergr to bring chaos to society."

"…What are you saying?"

"Do I really need to spell it out? I'm saying that the Anglican Church's ongoing attempt to analyze them through the proper methods is no exception."

“!?”

Stiyl frantically turned toward her, but she was already gone.

There was nowhere for a person to hide in the area.

No one else seemed to have noticed anyone disappear.

In fact, some people were looking at Stiyl because of his strange actions.

“…”

As Stiyl stood there dumbfounded, he heard his cell phone ringing.

It was from the Necessarius communications official.

“This is a notification for Stiyl Magnus. The time for your periodic report on the incident regarding the Dawn-Colored Sunlight has passed. Please immediately provide the information through the proper method.”

“You speak well for someone who was led around by Richard so easily.”

“All of the problems have been resolved, have they not?”

“Yes, they have,” replied Stiyl after thinking for a second. “It’s all over.”

(…Is it really?)

Stiyl Magnus added that last bit silently within his heart.

Something remained after that battle was over.

Stiyl’s thoughts remained on that new small flame that could one day grow into a much larger blaze.

マーク＝スペース

とある魔術の禁書目録（インデックス）SP

MARK SPACE

A completely ordinary stone apartment building existed within the London Borough of Lambeth. One room of that ordinary apartment was a base of a magic cabal large enough to shake all of the United Kingdom.

The cabal was known as the Dawn-Colored Sunlight.

They did not create the grand towers or palaces used by witches in picture books. They divided up their assets as much as possible and gathered only the necessary things and people at one of their bases when they were needed to perform some kind of ceremonial magic. These bases were not strange secret lairs. Instead, they were apartments or other kinds of rented rooms. If they did not do all that, their losses due to attacks from the anti-magician organization of the Anglican Church would be too great.

The magic side was referred to as a single entity, but many different factions and forces existed within it. While some of them were divided by their specific doctrine like the Roman Catholic Church or the Anglican Church (although those two were not magic cabals), some magic cabals were created solely to maximize profit.

All sorts of different types of cabals existed and any number of things sent sparks flying between cabals. They chaotically grew, chaotically fought, chaotically destroyed each other, and finally reached some kind of strange overall balance. Like that, the different powers continued to grow and shrink below the surface where normal people never saw them.

“Ahh, now this is nice. I could get used to having one of these rather than a fireplace.”

The boss of the Dawn-Colored Sunlight, a girl named Birdway, was relaxing within a strange item she had ordered from an eastern island nation. It was called a kotatsu and it was something like a combination of a table and a bed. In order to use this strange item, she had created a “no shoes zone” in the room.

All that was well and good, but it was only the beginning of fall. It was too early to be bringing out a kotatsu. It seemed the master of the room really wanted to try out the item she had ordered from Japan.

The blonde girl who looked about 12 stuck her slender, black stocking-covered legs under the thick blanket as she flipped through a magazine and cut up some reddish-brown yokan.

The title of the magazine was Einstein.

It was a well-known science magazine.

“With the space age finally here, it seems the hot topics are acquiring lunar resources and developing low-cost launch methods. …Wait, how would you use ceremonial magic in space? The protection from leylines would weaken and the entire concept of the cardinal direction as well as up and down would be gone, so how would you create a temple? N-no, but you might be able to use that to your advantage and create some kind of never-before-seen ceremonial grounds that rotates in all 360 degrees. If you did that, you might end up with some kind of never-before-seen effect!! Dammit. I should have taken the measurements before when I had the chance!!”

“You can’t, boss,” kindly said a blond man wearing black formal clothes and a scarf.

He was pouring black tea for himself into a refined Japanese teacup.

“That is of the science side. It is outside of our jurisdiction.”

“I know, I know. …You never let me have any fun,” said Birdway with a click of her tongue in response to his realism.

But pointing out things like that could be said to be the blond man’s job.

“What is going on today? Why did you suddenly yell at me to go buy you this magazine?”

“That would be because of this.”

Birdway flipped the page and pointed toward an article titled, “Let’s Resolve the Energy Crisis! A New Weapon Appears to Advance Oil Drilling in the Arctic Ocean!!”

The blond subordinate raised his face from the magazine.

“You can’t, boss.”

“Not that, you idiot. You have guts to start lecturing me before I’ve even told you what I’m talking about.”

Birdway threw some of the cut-up yokan into her mouth and made a slurping noise as she sipped at her green tea. Her subordinate was fully permeated with European culture, so he looked displeased at the noise. The girl gave a satisfied (and evil) grin before continuing the discussion.

“Some people are saying it would be a problem if the development reaches the Arctic.”

“…? Can parts for spiritual items be found there?”

Forests and mountains where magical plants could be harvested were a vital resource for magic cabals, but the Arctic Ocean held no value for the Dawn-Colored Sunlight. They did not rely on marine products.

"No, not that." Birdway kicked her feet underneath the kotatsu. "Suspicion has arisen that the Dusk Exit is supporting the oil drilling team in the Arctic."

"…A British Golden-style cabal like us."

The blond subordinate clearly looked displeased at that. The Golden-style cabals were referred to as a group, but there were countless different types. The types of spells they used and goals they held were all different. The Dusk Exit was famous for being very wasteful and causing problems for others by using up limited personnel and resources.

There was no concept of equivalent exchange in modern magic.

How great a result could one gain from a limited resource? It could be called a means of cheating each other using the exchange rate. As a result, the failure of a large-scale ceremony was all the more disastrous.

However, the Dusk Exit did not see it that way.

It was similar to spending a hundred million yen on a piece of gold the size of your fingertip.

They were a group of savages who acted like intellectuals and they were often criticized as not even being magicians because they abandoned all thought and tried to make everything work by brute force.

"A few pieces of technology connected to Academy City are involved with this oil drilling." Birdway dug through a small basket that held a few different types of teacakes. "Thanks to that, both the science side and the magic side are mad at the other claiming they have 'crossed the line'. On top of that, it seems the Dusk Exit wants to use the funds they gain from the oil drilling to deal with a Portuguese market, so it seems there's enough of a just cause."

A market.

When they used that term, they referred to a magic cabal that dealt in human trafficking.

"A Portuguese market… So children?"

"Yes, as materials for spiritual items. They'll just be used up. A human's life force is used to refine magic power, but it seems they want to refine a large amount of magic power in an instant to get an explosive reaction from a large-scale spell."

Birdway laughed and grabbed a quill that lay beside her. She wrote on a small piece of memo paper. The curves seemed extremely arbitrary, rough, and flowing like a celebrity's signature. The verb "drawing" almost seemed more appropriate than "writing".

After only 15 seconds, she had completed an exceedingly simplified charm.

"Apparently, the idiots in the Dusk Exit can only create a single copy of something like this using up three whole kids. As a fellow Golden-style magician, it almost gives me a headache."

"…"

With her subordinate looking on silently, Birdway tapped her index finger in the center of the charm. That was enough to activate the spell which caused a few biscuits to pop out of the charm.

Birdway tossed a freshly baked biscuit into her mouth.

"This is only an estimate, but most likely, it will take only about 0.7 seconds for the children they use to be shattered both inside and out. They will be nothing but empty shells by the end. Doesn't that extreme wastefulness sound exactly like something they'd do? If the oil platform being developed is completed, the Dusk Exit will set up a distribution route using the funds they receive and that will be enough to create the framework for pitiful children to be sent flowing into the darkness."

An unpleasant strength focused itself in the blond subordinate's brow.

It may have seemed ridiculous, but he had his own sense of morality.

Meanwhile, Birdway tapped her finger on a photo in the science magazine with a casual expression on her face.

"And so those who claim to protect the peace are going to start by destroying this."

"The ocean resources survey ship…?"

"It's a large ship that is searching for areas filled with oil. It also has enough equipment and materials onboard to build an offshore oil platform. I mentioned that the Dusk Exit's oil platform was still being developed, remember? Well, if this ship is sunk, their plan will be brought to a complete halt. It seems they don't have the excess money needed to prepare a replacement ship."

"What does any of this have to do with us?" asked the blond subordinate cautiously. "You couldn't possibly be thinking of creating a united front with the Anglican Church or Academy City, could you? And even if we were to do it alone, the Dawn-Colored Sunlight would gain nothing from it."

When the subordinate thought about it, the story may have been a good sob story, but it was so simple that it actually made him cautious. If "those who claim to protect the peace" had invited them, it could be a trap.

"No," said Birdway denying all of that with a single word. "We have no obligation to go along with the Anglican Church or Academy City's mission of self-satisfaction. If they were going to go and crush some shitty cabal, I'd gladly just sit back and watch the show, but that's not what this is about."

"?"

"Ugh, what a pain. Just look at this."

Birdway's small finger slid to the side of the photo of the ocean resources survey ship. She pointed at a group photo of intellectuals wearing lab coats that had a caption under it saying, "The scientists who created the world's largest survey ship."

The blond subordinate let out a groan upon seeing that.

He recognized one of the faces.

It was Patricia Birdway.

He had heard that she had been invited as a guest researcher at a British science institution due to the high praise her internet-published paper had received from scientists around the world, but he had never thought she would be enjoying an extended cruise after working on a project to create such a ridiculously huge ship.

"...A-a suppression mission is going to be carried out soon, right? And that will involve sinking that ship as well as everyone aboard?"

"Correct," Birdway said in a solemn voice as she brought both her elbows up onto the kotatsu and folded her hands in front of her face. "Simply put, this is very bad. Please do something about it."

♦

Water spread out in every direction.

Possibly due to the Foehn phenomenon, the ocean surface glittered like it was midsummer despite the season actually being the beginning of autumn. The ocean wind grew warm and the sun sent out piercing rays of white light.

A single object floated amid it all: the Blue Research.

It was a survey ship meant to search for oil sleeping at the bottom of the ocean, but its shape was difficult to describe. One possible description was three 500 meter tankers lined up next to each other with a giant metal sheet on top. However, instead of a single metal sheet, multiple long narrow ones were lined up, creating intentional gaps between. It looked something like a giant moving set of artificial fishing ponds.

More than 30 cranes made of countless metal pipes covered the metal sheet and a winch with a small submarine hanging down was installed at one end. One portion was filled with the parts needed to construct the offshore oil platform and there were also three circular heliports with an H drawn in the middle. Sitting atop one of them was what was said to be an observation helicopter, but it was actually an attack helicopter. It was most likely there to drive back any pirates targeting the metal sheets or anything else of value.

Something floated above the world's largest survey ship that was created from and filled with giant masses of metal.

The object was 50 meters up.

As it flew silently through the air, it looked something like a fluttering butterfly or a leaf caught in the wind. However, it was actually a card.

It was the ace of swords.

The scrap of paper that was no more substantial than a commercial trading card landed atop the end of one of the dozens-of-meters-long cranes…or so it seemed. However, it actually stabbed deeply into the thick metal pillar with a slight slicing noise.

The number one was the beginning.

A change occurred that displayed that number.

"There we go," said a man.

A blond man wearing black formal clothes and a scarf stood on the end of the crane as if he had appeared out of thin air. His name was Mark Space. He was the magician who had come to the Arctic Ocean on the orders of the boss of the Dawn-Colored Sunlight, Birdway, whose legs had been stuck under the kotatsu at their base.

(Hm. It seems I wasn't noticed.)

Mark quickly checked around the area as he stood on the end of the crane. Instead of a thick wire, a large drill hung from the crane. In order to carry out the drilling from atop the unstable ship, the metal pillar had joints at set intervals so it could bend freely like an animal's spine.

He could see a few workers from where he stood, but none of them were looking his way. …Well, that was not too surprising. They were worried about pirates approaching in small armed boats, not someone being blown in on the wind.

Mark's objective was to recover Patricia Birdway who was aboard the large survey ship, the Blue Research. If he did not meet up with the girl and get her off the ship before the imminent attack, they would get wrapped up in it.

"I suppose I should get started."

Mark sat down on the slanted crane with his legs to the side and slid down as if sliding down a banister. He controlled his speed by strengthening or weakening his grip on the edge of the crane using his white-gloved hand. When he silently and lightly landed on the roof of the driver's seat box at the base of the crane, he used his momentum to immediately head down to the deck.

(Was Miss Patricia's field of study marine geology?)

Mark ran along the ship while ducking through the gaps of the complex layout of pipes that were most likely for the crude oil and mud to pass through once it was drilled. As he ran, he pulled a deck of cards out of his pocket. Mark used tarot. The 22-card major arcana was more famous and included such cards as the Hierophant and the Lovers, but he specialized in the minor arcana. The minor arcana had 56 cards divided into the four suits of wands, cups, swords, and coins.

Those four suits could be used to create symbolic weapons of fire, water, wind, and earth respectively.

Of the four suits of the minor arcana, Mark Space specialized in the 14 sword cards that corresponded to wind.

That included the number cards from ace to 10 and the court cards which were the page, the knight, the queen, and the king. Also, Mark used special tarot cards that were optimized to be used as symbolic weapons that activated the spells used by Golden-style organizations.

(Really, that princess always asks for such ridiculous things. Although, if she foolishly handed me the major arcana, that would be a problem in its own way…)

Those 14 cards were the whole of the hand Mark had to use.

And he had already used the ace of swords in his entry, so…

(Thirteen left.)

As he travelled quickly across the ship, Mark rechecked his own strength.

The sword card symbolic weapons were not all equal. Nor were the ones with greater numbers stronger than the ones with lesser numbers. Even though they all had the attribute of yellow, the number changed the power that manifested itself in the real world, so the spell activated by each card was different.

He did not have 13 of a single spell. He had 13 different spells.

Gritting his teeth at what that meant, Mark stared forward as he ran.

(I will shake off all the danger using these and rescue Miss Patricia!!)

♦

Mark Space had built up his determination, but…

“Mark! Do you have your handheld game system with you? Let’s make a friends connection.”

“No, um…”

The magician was seriously flustered as he stood within a small room filled with computers that used lasers or ultrasonic waves (he didn’t know the details) to search for oil at the bottom of the ocean. Somehow foolish-sounding electronic noises filled the room as if to mock him.

“Huh!? I didn’t get the Wind Angel Armor… Maybe you can’t get it with a simple friends connection. Or maybe it has to do with the date. O-okay, it’s sort of cheating, but let’s try again after I change the system’s calendar.”

“M-miss Patricia. There is something I must discuss with-…”

“C’mon, Mark!! I need your help to get the Wind Angel Armor!! Just by equipping it, you get more experience points, so I won’t be satisfied until I have it!!”

“Ee!! But this game’s balance is biased!! The gods from Japanese mythology clearly get the higher stats!!”

“Well, the game was made by a Japanese company for the Japanese market, so there’s no helping it. Even if you say it’s based around a school, I don’t have a good grasp of what a Japanese school is like,” said the small girl with a laugh as she munched on an apple pie that seemed to be freshly made. “Mgh. This is just so much better. I need to ask her for the recipe. Oh, this young American woman named Reffile who works in the ship’s kitchen baked this really good apple pie for me!”

Seeing Patricia like that calmed Mark down a little, but he was also reminded that the girl had the same blood running through her veins as her sister.

Mark had attempted to tell her he had something to tell her, but he had been cut off so quickly that he decided to change his tactic.

“W-was it really okay for me to intrude like this? I was just wondering if I was getting in the way of your work.”

“No, no. You don’t need to worry about that.” Patricia looked up from her handheld game and smiled. “This may be the world’s largest marine resources survey ship, but it’s really nothing more than a means to stand up to Academy City. Their ship is better when it comes to actual capability, but they wanted ours to be better than Academy City’s in some way. Since its sole purpose is to show off, it’s actually registered as a British ship even though the taxes would have been lower if it was registered with Panama.”

“Oh, I see,” Mark Space said arbitrarily as a sweat drop dripped down from his temple to his cheek.

He had a single problem.

(…How am I supposed to bring this up?)

Birdway, the boss of the Dawn-Colored Sunlight, worked to ensure that her younger sister Patricia did not find out about magic. There was of course an implicit understanding that all of her subordinates would go along with that as well. That meant he had to convince Patricia without using the word magic and had to get her off of the Blue Research without letting her detect any magical phenomena.

(If it comes down to it, I can use the helicopter on the Blue Research to escape if I must do so without magic. Right now, I need to worry more about how to convince Miss Patricia to leave rather than the means of escape.)

“Mwoooooohhhh!! What am I supposed to do!?”

“?”

Patricia looked at Mark with a puzzled expression as he held his head in his hands and tore at his hair.

“My sister really does worry too much. I can’t believe she went to the effort of chartering a helicopter to send you here. I can deal with everything here myself. And it must be tough for you too, Mark. She just sends you all over the place on a whim.”

“Ha ha ha.”

“It’s lucky the Blue Research has plenty of heliports. What were you going to do if there was nowhere to land? My sister’s excessive use of money must cause a lot of problems for you.”

"…"

Mark buried his head in his hands upon hearing Patricia's completely normal and common interpretation of the events.

She would never even dream of the possibility of a magic cabal being involved with the Blue Research.

She would never even dream of possibility of a combined attack being carried out on the Blue Research.

She would never even dream of the possibility of escaping the ship using magic.

And if he failed, his boss, Birdway, would make sure to thoroughly kill him.

(What am I supposed to do? Is there no way!?)

In the normal world that Patricia Birdway lived in, she had been invited to the Blue Research as a guest researcher for one of the leading scientific institutions in the United Kingdom. She was taking an extended break from school for the event and everyone was expecting great things from her, so she could not simply leave. In other words, Patricia was not going to move an inch unless Mark managed to be quite eloquent indeed.

As the magician trembled, Patricia stared at him in confusion.

"What's wrong, Mark? You aren't looking too good."

"D-don't worry. It's nothi-…"

Before he finished speaking, a light bulb switched on above Mark Space's head.

He had only one possible strategy.

"That's iiiiiittttttttt!!"

"Ee!?"

"Miss Patricia, Miss Patricia!! The situation is most dire!! This is no time to be sitting her searching for the Wind Angel Armor!!"

"Wha-? Eh…? Th-there's something more important than the Wind Angel Armor? D-do you mean a super rare item like the Water Angel Lily!?"

"Lady Birdway has collapsed!! She is currently in the hospital, but the doctors say she only has about a 50/50 chance. This could be a truly urgent situation. Just in case, you need to head to the hospital to see her!!"

That was his sure-fire fake illness attack. He did not feel right lying about it, but a kind and pure girl like Patricia was sure to be worried enough to come with him.

“Hmm. I’d really like to do that, but…”

“Huh!? That’s surprisingly cold of you!!”

“Ah ha ha. My sister always says you need to be able to take care of yourself before you can worry about others. That’s part of the reason that I’m working so hard on my own. Not to mention that she would come out looking perfectly fine even if a building exploded around her.”

Patricia was likely only joking, but that was actually literally true. However…

(E-even when she is not here, you are the only one that can say that kind of thing about that monster!! That is a frightening ability, Miss Patricia!!)

However, that was no time to tremble in fear. Since he had come so far, Mark had no choice but to make sure the sure-fire fake illness attack worked.

As such, he had to add on details to her condition.

“Th-the truth is Lady Birdway managed to get her hands on an Ultra Huge Breasts Cream Set that claimed it could easily give anyone large breasts.”

“A-and did it work!? Where did she get it!?”

“No, her breasts stayed the same size, but her areola alone grew quite large. It was a most tragic incident.”

“No…”

“And on top of that, she also acquired an Academy City breast growing machine. She put two bowl-like items over her breasts like vacuum packs. This caused them to turn a strange bluish-purple and she writhed around on the ground.”

“Nnn. But surely someone like my sister could deal with a situation like that.”

“Gh!? Th-that damn brat then refused to admit defeat and insisted with teary eyes that her breasts had grown and that she had leveled up. That was when even more strange side effects started occurring. After all sorts of strange twists and turns, her bust size ended up at over 5 meters and she had 8 nipples. They looked something like Gatling guns and it was quite disturb-…hahh!?”

A chill suddenly shot down Mark’s spine.

He had a feeling it had been killer intent.

He didn't want to think of the possibility, but Birdway might have been using some kind of magical means to keep an eye on him.

With sweat covering his body, Mark Space timidly looked around the area.

The pure Patricia was not aware of the impending danger and she was tugging on Mark's clothes.

"H-her life might really be in danger!! If that really did happen to her, I can't just ignore it! I don't like leaving the research team, but I really am only needed once the drilling point has been discovered, so they should manage."

"Now you tell me!! If I had known that, I wouldn't have had to cross that deadly tightrope!!"

"?"

Patricia gave an innocent and lovely look of puzzlement.

Mark pointed and said, "Oh, Miss Patricia. Did you just get the Wind Angel Armor?"

"Eh!?" she said and frantically looked down at her handheld game.

Just as she did, Mark's leg flew straight over her head.

Of course, his kick had not been aimed at Patricia.

Something had been creeping up behind her. A strange green figure had appeared there at some point. Mark's leg had moved just before its hand had reached Patricia's shoulder.

When his whip-like kick struck the side of the figure's head, he felt a damp feeling like he had crushed a clump of rotting leaves. No noise was made. The figure disappeared as if it had never been there at all.

"Oh, c'mon, Mark!! This isn't the Wind Angel Armor; it's the Exusiai Armor! That's a common item!"

When Patricia raised her head, Mark had a bitter smile on his face and his foot was lowered to the same position it had been in 2 seconds before.

(…Earth Telesma. So it is a fellow Golden-style magician!!)

As he internally analyzed the situation, Mark reached his hand out toward the center of Patricia's chest like he was pressing an elevator button.

He held a single card in his palm.

It was the two of swords.

Silence and interruption. Just as he did, Patricia's mind and body were split apart causing her to lose consciousness.

It was as if he were making sure no one else could interfere with her.

"Hehh. What a kind attacker."

Along with that sudden voice, he heard a dry sound and the ceiling of the room was sliced apart in a straight line. No, that was not quite accurate. An invisible blade extending from the ceiling reached down and sliced the floor at the same time. It headed straight through the spot Mark had been standing in an instant before.

(The enemy is…above!?)

Mark held Patricia's unconscious form in one arm as he opened the metal door to leave the small room and head into the passageway.

That had been a mistake.

"But it seems you are more stupid than kind."

"!?"

The instant he heard that voice coming from the side, Mark felt a dull but heavy shock in his side. It felt like he had been struck by one of the giant bells in a Buddhist temple. Mark doubled over and flew a few meters before landing. His sense of professionalism made sure he balled himself up in order to protect Patricia.

The world's largest marine resources survey ship was a mass of scientific technology and its main purpose was for oil drilling. The passageway Mark rolled through was a surprisingly dirty one filled with ugly metal pipes.

"Gh…bh…!!"

As Mark coughed, a dark red liquid escaped his lips.

He just barely managed to get back up and spotted a cylindrical stone pillar floating on its side and a woman standing next to it. She wore a short skirt, a shirt that was open on the front, an oddly long glove that reached her upper arm on her right hand, and a lace glove of the sort a lady would wear on her left hand. The left glove was light pink while the right one was split vertically with one side white and the other black.

On her left hand, the woman wore rings with letters of the alphabet on them as if they were stamps. She was using that hand to toy with her bangs as she gave a faint smile.

“A tarot user, hm? And instead of using the 22 cards of the major arcana that each connect directly to their respective sephira, you’re using the minor arcana as symbolic weapons of fire, water, wind, and earth.”

Mark saw no sign of the ship’s crew coming to see what the commotion was about.

The woman before him had likely used a people clearing spell.

“You cannot use their power to its fullest because the pathways to the one who can give you permission to touch the gem have been intentionally cut off. …You must be from a cabal with quite some leadership. The idea that only the limited supervisors may touch the true meaning of Kabbalah has made its way into your very core.”

“…To be honest, you do not look like someone from the Dusk Exit.”

“Please do not think of me as the same as those beasts,” said the woman as she looked at Mark as if evaluating him. “My name is Wyss Winered. I am also known as Time Loss. Simply put, people hire me to buy them some time. I was hired here to deal with magicians like you.”

“Why?”

A lot of assumed information was contained within that short question.

The marine resources survey ship, Blue Research, was being supported by the Dusk Exit. They were crossing the line between magic and science in order to use the crude oil they found to obtain children from a Portuguese “market”. Those children would be inefficiently used en masse to create only small effects. Mark was asking why she would join them.

“Well,” Wyss’s response was short as well. It too held quite a bit of assumed information. “I was just hoping for some leftovers.”

“…”

He said nothing more.

Mark Space ended the conversation with her.

Power filled the tarot card he held.

The card Mark held between his index finger and middle finger was the three of swords.

The trigger of mayhem and the sorrow that invites bad luck. Mark swung it upwards diagonally and the air sliced, following that motion. The air became a single giant sword and sliced through even the very end of the passageway.

“Your speed’s not bad.”

In response, Wyss lightly swung her left hand with the alphabet rings and spun her right arm with its long, black-and-white glove.

Matching that motion, the stone pillar floating next to her crushed the air blade. Wind and earth. The two elements came into conflict, exploded, and a storm of vacuum and stone scattered about at high speed.

Mark made no attempt to defend against it.

Instead, he pulled out the four of swords.

Flight and banishment. The instant the card emitted a soft glow, Mark and Patricia’s bodies disappeared into thin air. The card floated through the air and avoided the violence. Once it had escaped the barrage, the human forms reappeared…and directly attacked Wyss.

But…

“Too slow.”

Mark heard those words right after using the five of swords to slice through Wyss’s body which he quickly realized was a fake made of sand.

However, he did not make it in time.

He felt something touch the left side of his head. Mark immediately swung his head to the side and a tremendous shock shook his brain. He could not even comprehend how he had been attacked. At any rate, the heavy, hammer-like attack caused his semicircular canals to cease functioning. To prevent himself from falling, Mark steadied himself against the narrow passageway’s wall.

His vision shook.

Mark somehow managed to hang on to his fleeing consciousness.

That was when the third wave arrived.

Something like a bowling ball shot toward him. He managed to detect that much, but his body did not move in response. The blunt weapon struck him directly, applying even more pressure to his skull. This time, all strength left Mark’s body. Patricia’s body fell from his grasp. Mark could see that as he slid down to the ground, but he could not bring his body to move.

“Golden-style magic is often referred to as a whole, but there are all sorts of different types.” Wyss’s voice reverberated within Mark’s throbbing head. “Your tarot is intended for large scale ceremonies. It just isn’t suited for battles where quick actions are needed.”

Mark did not say anything in response.

Instead, he silently pulled out the six of swords.

That card symbolized the chance to answer a difficult question.

His conversation with Wyss Winered was already over.

♦

Mark ran through the passageway, still holding his tarot cards.

He no longer had the leeway needed to hold Patricia. He hid her unconscious form behind something and stood up as a lone magician.

As Wyss chased him, she activated various pieces of magic.

Multiple stone pillars flew through the air, sharp arrowhead-like stone fragments rained down, and thin, disk-like blades sliced through the air.

No crewmembers were in the area.

Wyss Winered may have used some kind of people clearing magic, but it was also possible that area had been designated as a battle area by the Blue Research, so everyone was keeping their distance. At any rate, Wyss’s various attacks were only aimed at Mark.

Her spells were both varied and quick, so the walls and metal pipes of the marine resources survey ship were torn apart, severed, crushed, and otherwise destroyed. The stage of the battle was no longer the straight passageway. It had moved to an area a few floors down that was about the size of a school gym and filled with drilling machinery.

It was not an engine room that rotated a giant propeller. It merely allowed the Blue Research to provide power for the drilling operation. The two magicians’ battle escalated within that area filled with giant engines.

The reason Mark had gone there was clear.

It had not been an active decision.

Mark Space was being chased.

“Why don’t you just realize it’s hopeless?” Wyss smiled as she created a stone spear from a rippling wall. “It may be true that each of your individual attacks is stronger than mine, but I can always circle around and crush your attack before you can get it off. Due to how much work you have to do, you can never catch up to me.”

A red light floated up at the tip of the spear and Wyss spun it around.

This created a crimson circle. What appeared from that primitive magic circle was a deluge of flames.

Her attacks were no longer just of the earth element.

“!?”

Mark pulled out the eight of swords.

It symbolized a hindrance, a wall, or a weight. The wall of wind it created scattered the flames and then Mark spun the eight of swords around before its effects wore off.

Simply put, the card was now reversed.

This held a different meaning from the symbol he had used for defense. The power being scattered outward was transformed into an attacking sword.

But before he could swing that sword, Wyss made her move.

An arm of water came from the right and a shell of vacuum came from the left.

Before he could react, both attacks struck Mark and he was blown away. Despite the fact that only his body had struck them, he heard the roar of steel pipes and machinery being crushed.

“I told you it was hopeless,” repeated Wyss Winered. “No matter how much you optimize the spell, a ceremonial spell requires the preparation of the area, the construction of a safe area for the spell user, the calling in of the power, the manipulation of that power, and finally the safe return of that power. Its power can only be properly used in a long-distance attack. Your spells are not suited for close-quarters combat. Did you make a mistake when choosing your weapon or are you enough of an idiot to only know how to use this one type of weapon?”

“…”

Mark did not respond as he lay buried in a pile of metal.

The nine of swords he had just started to activate fell from his hand.

He observed Wyss’s body with his dim consciousness.

Or rather, he observed two parts of her.

The first was her right hand. On that hand was the long glove split down the center with the right side white and the left side black.

The second was her left hand. She had two rings on that hand. The one on her middle finger had the letter J carved on it and the one on her index finger had the letter B carved on it.

Mark clicked his tongue.

He came to a gradual understanding of what kind of magic his enemy was using.

(The entrance, hm?)

Jachin and Boaz. Those were the name of stereotypical spiritual items that had originally been the two pillars decorating the entrance to Solomon's Temple and were now placed at the entrance to ceremonial grounds in Western magic. The two pillars acted as guideposts to call in power and Wyss was using her hands and entire body to represent them.

In doing so, she had eliminated a lot of the effort needed to activate magic.

Wyss only had to set what kind of power she wanted to produce and alter the positions of the two pillars in order to produce an attack. While Mark had to rely on a tool for the entire process, she used her body to represent the magic circle and symbols which reduced the effort needed from a speed standpoint.

It was true that he could not outdo that kind of speed.

An ominous roar radiated out from Wyss.

It was a type of omen.

Tarot and the two pillars. Neither was clearly superior to the other. However, in that situation, at that range, and with that timing, Wyss would clearly crush Mark.

But…

"…What?" Wyss Winered frowned slightly. "Why are you smiling?"

"You probably should have put a little more thought into what the things you yourself said mean," said Mark with bloody lips as he remained buried in rubble. "Ceremonial magic is powerful but slow. You yourself said so, so you should know that this is no time for you to be smiling."

"Don't tell me you think you can overcome my speed with your tarot."

“That’s just the thing.” Mark must not have had the strength to stand up because he shook his head where he was. “I do not need to be faster than you for each individual attack.” Mark paused for a second. “After all, when I am using a single powerful attack, I merely need to use it once.”

By the time Wyss felt a chill run down her spine, it was too late.

The world’s largest marine resources survey ship, the Blue Research, was created from three 500-meter tankers lined up next to each other with countless metal plates connecting them. The entire ship started creaking ominously. A massive amount of power was causing space itself to tremble.

“…A single powerful attack?”

Wyss’s instinct told her she was in trouble.

Mark had said he was using a *single* powerful attack.

He had used all sorts of different tarot cards, but he was not counting those.

That meant…

All the tarot cards Mark had scattered up to that point had been…

“Are you saying all of those were part of your strategy? But you had no overall purpose in their use. It was all you could do to use them at random to try to keep up with my speed!!”

“Yes, and that was enough. Using the spells as an immediate reaction to your attacks was the proper thing to do. That’s simply how tarot works. You don’t cheat and look at what the cards are before flipping them over. You simply flip them over one at a time without thinking.” Mark smiled. “But you do not discard cards in tarot. The true essence of tarot does not lie in each individual card. The table on which multiple cards are lined up is what is important.”

In other words, he was activating the cards as tarot cards rather than as symbolic weapons.

“When the tarot cards arranged on the table are flipped over, they give meaning.”

He had made the entire Blue Research correspond to the table on which the tarot cards lay.

“As the cards are flipped over, you lose freedom, and the number of cards I could use did indeed lower. However, in exchange, the entire table’s element and direction became more definite.”

Of course, the ruler of the table was the man who had control of the tarot cards.

“And all of the cards I flipped over here were sword cards. Since I only had that one suit, the table’s color was naturally uniform. I did not have to even think about what element and direction I was giving the giant table that the Blue Research has become.”

As he spoke, Mark pulled out a single card.

It was the ten of swords.

It was his final number card, leaving him with only the four court cards.

“It holds the meaning of a great tragedy. Right side up, it is the greatest symbol of tragedy among the 56 cards of the minor arcana. However, when reversed, it holds the meaning of a strong heart that fights against unreasonable atrocities.”

The number cards, ace through 10, indicated the kind of phenomenon that would occur.

The court cards, the page, the knight, the queen, and the king, indicated who it would occur to.

“Now all the details regarding the power and phenomenon have been put together. Only the selection of the person remains. It is all collected within the court cards.”

A chill covered Wyss’s entire body.

The phenomenon was occurring.

(Dammit. What is he calling in!?)

The true essence of Golden-style ceremonial magic was the use of Telesma. The element of the angel corresponding to the desired object or desired effect would be chosen and then either taken into the magic user’s physical body, used as a foothold in the creation of special spiritual item, or simply used to create a phenomenon that would be impossible with simple magic power.

But what was the spell that existed as a basis for all that?

What had been developed as the foundation for Golden-style magic cabals?

“Its elemental color is yellow. Its directional location is the front. And most importantly, it is the one who rules over wind and air,” Mark chanted.

He slowly lifted his head while still collapsed on the ground and spoke as if calling out to a friend.

“Hey, glorious archangel. How are you doing?”

The summoning of an angel.

Naturally, he was not dragging down an angel in its entirety. That was not something that could be done by a mere magician.

Mark Space was only calling in a mass of Telesma.

Most likely, what was categorized as an angel among Golden-style cabals was nothing more than a small fraction of their power.

However, whether it was only a tenth or even a hundredth of their power, it was more than enough to do away with a magician or two.

(Sorry.)

Mark recalled the conversation he and Patricia had had.

He recalled the handheld game she had been playing.

(My poor skills are not enough to display any details like the armor of this wind angel.)

It might have been possible if one used all 22 cards of the major arcana, but Mark was not as skilled as Birdway. And what he had was more than enough to defeat Wyss Winered.

“You are the one that said it,” said Mark with a smile as he pointed and gave a command. “Ceremonial magic is slower but more powerful.”

He did not wait for his opponent to respond.

Wind blew and dust flew.

♦

A small Cessna plane flew slowly through the blue sky.

Its flight plan said it had taken off at an airport in Scotland and would return after flying around the Arctic Ocean for two hours. At that time of year, curious sightseers wanting to watch orcas through binoculars would likely be paying for it.

However, that Cessna plane had two things that set it apart from most planes with similar flight plans.

First, it did not have any sightseers aboard.

Second, a few devices in its storage area were dumped down into the ocean.

The devices were long, narrow, and about a meter long. There were four of them. The Cessna plane dropped them so they formed a circle with a diameter of 500 meters.

When the devices hit the ocean surface, they sank down and then floated back up like a buoy or fishing bobber. The Cessna's pilot made two or three quick transmissions.

After that, everything would continue according to the normal flight plan.

The Cessna plane slowly flew across the Arctic Ocean.

Only the devices floating among the waves remained.

The letters on their side read "Down Waver".

♦

Wyss Winered had been defeated.

Mark slowly stood up from the destroyed machinery. He was unable to move any faster. As if all of his joints were dislocated, he felt pain of various types and intensities every time he moved.

The drilling equipment had been utterly destroyed. Many of the thick pipes had been broken in half, white steam was being emitted from various places, and the steel inner door had been torn apart as if it had been a paper sliding door. Wyss's spells had done a fair bit of damage, but the damage from the archangel was everywhere. Mark could not see anything in the room that had not been destroyed.

(…An attack from an angel.)

Mark looked down at his own hand. He held four cards there. All of the number cards had been arranged, leaving him with only court cards. The archangel Telesma he had called in was condensed inside the court cards, putting it under Mark's control.

He could not relax yet.

He had to escape before the general attack began.

(…Kh. Where is Miss Patricia…?)

Mark walked back the way he had come, seeming to drag himself through the pain. As he did, Wyss briefly entered his field of vision. She was passed out and her limbs were sprawled about, but he did not pay any attention to her.

Since the Blue Research had prepared a magician like her, it could not be a normal ship. The crew was made up of the kind of people that would gather money to spend on children at a "market". He had to escape with Patricia as quickly as possible.

"…What are you…planning to do?"

Mark slowly turned around upon hearing that sudden voice. She had been unconscious just a second before, but now Wyss was faintly staring at him.

"…I just received word that the attack is beginning. This ship can no longer be saved. You should just give up and leave the ship."

"What are you saying?" Mark asked, sensing some kind of discrepancy in her words.

Why did she seem so glad that the Blue Research would be sunk? That was the reverse of what he would expect of someone who had been hired by the Dusk Exit.

Wyss Winered then said, "*Your precious Dusk Exit is done for*. I'm saying it serves you right."

(It couldn't be…)

Wyss had said she had been hired to buy some time as Time Loss. *But who had hired her?* For what purpose was she buying time?

Wasn't it possible she had been hired to buy some time to make sure no one escaped the Blue Research before the attack began?

"Were you hired by Academy City or the Anglican Church?"

"You idiot? You didn't even know-…?" Wyss trailed off and must have noticed something odd about what Mark was saying. A mocking smile appeared on her face. "Hah. Don't tell me you're from some other cabal than the Dusk Exit."

Mark averted his gaze.

That was enough of a response.

(How confusing. When she said she wanted some "leftovers", that must have referred to some leftover jobs…)

But something still did not add up.

Mark Space and Wyss Winered were both magicians with no connection to the Dusk Exit. So where were the Dusk Exit magicians who were supposedly aboard the Blue Research? Normal people were one thing, but any expert magician would have noticed that commotion. Surely they would have reacted in some way.

As he thought, a very bad feeling crept up in the back of Mark's mind.

"Hey!!" He grabbed Wyss's collar and lifted her up "You can't mean…Please don't tell me they aren't here…"

They had certainly received information that the Dusk Exit was behind the Blue Research.

However…

"Don't tell me the only people aboard are normal hardworking people who know nothing about the money gained here funding a magic cabal, that money being used to buy children from a Portuguese market, or those children being dragged down into the darkness!!"

"You've gotta be kidding me…"

Wyss looked utterly dumbfounded.

For the first time, her expression held no hostility or scorn.

"Why are you only checking on this kind of thing now?"

(Dammit!!)

Mark let go of Wyss's collar and cursed silently.

Whatever the reason and whatever the circumstances, the money made there would cause some kind of incident. The Dusk Exit would use the funds to buy children from a Portuguese "market" magic cabal and then use those unfortunate children as disposable resources for creating spiritual items. The process would destroy the children in 0.7 seconds. That was why they were simply going to blow away the ship in its entirety. Actually, those who claimed to protect the peace probably did not even care about the children. The attack was punishment for those who crossed the line between magic and science. They would defend the agreement they had made. That was all "protecting the peace" meant to them.

(What do I do?)

Mark Space had been ordered to take Patricia Birdway from the Blue Research before the attack so she would not get caught up in it.

But was it right to just let everyone else aboard be killed?

Did a truly excellent subordinate do nothing but follow his orders to the letter?

(Let's do this.)

Mark made a silent vow as he clenched his teeth.

(I will save Patricia Birdway. As long as I do that, a slight detour should not matter. So I will do this. I will prove that the Dawn-Colored Sunlight is not so cheap a cabal!!)

Mark was thinking and travelling through the ship when…

"Wah wah! Mark, this is bad!!"

Suddenly, Patricia herself came charging around a corner. He had stuck the two of swords to her chest, but it was gone. It may have been knocked off during all the fighting.

(The Telesma…)

Mark surreptitiously glanced down at the tarot cards in his hand. The Telesma he had called in was still there. It seemed a card or two being moved out of place was not enough to cause problems once the power had been gathered.

He spoke to Patricia while hiding that kind of magical information.

"What happened, Miss Patricia?"

"W-well…The thing is…!!"

From her perspective, the inside of the Blue Research had been utterly destroyed at some point. That had to have surprised her and Mark assumed that was what had her worried. However, that was not it.

Patricia was holding a large stack of documents in her arms and her face was pale.

"I-it's a waterspout! Or is it a whirlpool? A-at any rate, something bad is heading this way!!"

"?"

"Ah, it's hard to explain!! Um…come here!!"

Patricia grabbed Mark with her small hand and pulled him to a nearby room with surprising strength. Patricia operated the computer within the room and a wireframe ocean appeared on the screen.

It must have been a program used to display detailed waves and ocean currents.

However, that was not what it was currently showing.

It showed a giant pit with a diameter of 500 meters and a depth of around 70 meters.

Patricia had called it a waterspout. It must have been something similar to when a washing machine agitated the water around. As was evident when one stuck a hand in a bucket of water and spun it around, the center of a whirlpool created a pit.

And this giant "down wave" was approaching the Blue Research at tremendous speed. On its current route, the ship would surely be swallowed up.

"I don't think it would be visible right now if you just looked out at the ocean surface with binoculars," said Patricia as she stared at the screen. "Instead of rising up like with a tsunami, this whirlpool sinks down below the ocean surface. Looking out with the naked eye would show you nothing but a flat surface. An arc-like current might be visible like with a waterspout, but it will be too late by the time we can see that."

It was fortunate they were on the world's largest marine resources survey ship. The various instruments aboard allowed them to spot it well before normal.

"Miss Patricia, what will happen when that whirlpool reaches us? With a ship this large, could we somehow make it?"

"N-no." Patricia shook her head. "This whirlpool is heading for the ship at two or three hundred kilometers per hour. When it reaches us, the ship will rapidly sink to the depths of the whirlpool. Essentially, this ship will be falling from a height of about 70 meters. And then massive amounts of seawater will flow into the damaged areas…"

In that case, the heavier the ship, the more damage would be done.

It was like having the entire ship fall from a cliff. The crew would certainly not survive.

According to Patricia, the Blue Research was equipped with plenty of giant propellers, so it could resist the arcing currents caused around the down wave without being swept away. However, it was all over if they fell directly into the center.

"Can we avoid it?"

"This is a large ship. It isn't that easy…" Patricia's voice sounded bitter. "I contacted the rest of the crew, but they seem to be panicking. Not that I can blame them with that whirlpool suddenly appearing like that and heading toward us."

Mark was listening to her, but he started thinking about something else.

He recalled what Birdway, the boss of the Dawn-Colored Sunlight, had said. The Blue Research had violated the treaty, so it was going to be exterminated. And now a convenient localized disaster had occurred.

(This is bad. The attack has already begun!!)

The marine resources survey ship had life boats and heliports, but he doubted the attackers would allow any of the obvious escape methods to be used. And even if they could be used, Mark doubted they would be enough to save the entire crew of that giant ship.

Mark Space turned back toward Patricia.

"…This kind of thing does not happen often, right?"

"R-right. Sometimes earthquakes cause localized tsunamis in unrelated areas, but this is the first I've heard of something like this."

"So it would be unthinkable for two to occur in quick succession?"

"Umm, why are you asking me this..?"

(In other words, if the first one misses, they will not fire a second. If they did, it would simply seem too unnatural. They have to finish this with the first one in order to avoid any unnecessary attention on the incident.)

That also meant that they could manage if they survived the first one.

Mark reorganized his thoughts on the incident unfolding before him.

A down wave with a diameter of over 500 meters was approaching at 200-300 kph. It was impossible to avoid it even if they tried. Most likely, they could not use the life boats or helicopter. If it did reach them, they would suddenly fall about 70 meters. The handheld game. What Patricia had wanted. Everyone aboard the Blue Research was a normal person. How could they be saved? How could every single one of them be returned to their families?

"If…" Mark Space started. "If the ship were to survive in this situation, that would be quite a miracle, wouldn't it?"

"Mark, that…"

Patricia was not sure what to say.

But since she did not immediately deny the possibility, she may have believed in it a tiny bit. Or perhaps she could not keep her heart in balance without holding onto some kind of hope.

Normally thinking, no one would survive in that situation.

Not even an expert magician could overturn that situation.

But Mark Space had the archangel that ruled over wind and air.

(I only have the four court cards left.)

All of the Telesma he had called in was concentrated in those four cards.

He could summon it at any time.

The only question left was how he would use that ultimate hand.

An ocean cliff 500 meters across and 70 meters deep approached. If it reached them, even the world's largest marine resources survey ship would be smashed to pieces. As long as the ship was something that floated in the water, it had no way of fighting against the ocean surface itself falling away.

(I can only use the element of wind and air. I cannot directly manipulate the water, so I cannot destroy the ocean cliff or change its path.)

There was still hope left.

The ocean cliff damaged sailing vessels that floated on the ocean surface. In other words, it had no means of sinking something that floated in the air. If he could cause the Blue Research to float a few centimeters or even a single millimeter in the air, the ocean cliff would pass below them causing no damage. But…

(No, even if I can manipulate the wind and air, I cannot lift up such a huge ship like it was a hovercraft. This is not a problem that can be solved by just charging in at it.)

The Blue Research could not be moved.

The down wave approached as if it was aiming for the side of the ship.

Mark Space clenched the four court cards in his hand.

♦

"Well?"

A completely ordinary stone apartment building existed within the London Borough of Lambeth. One room of that ordinary apartment was a base of a magic cabal large enough to shake all of the United Kingdom.

The cabal was known as the Dawn-Colored Sunlight.

The cabal's boss, Birdway, was for some reason standing dauntingly atop a Japanese kotatsu.

A news program was running on a flat-screen television in the corner of the room.

"A down wave suddenly occurred in the Arctic Ocean, but the entire crew of the world's largest marine resources survey ship, the Blue Research, is confirmed to be safe."

The announcer reading the script must have been glad he was reading positive news because a slight hint of pride could be heard in his accurate pronunciation.

"According to the crew, a sudden tsunami lifted the entire Blue Research up temporarily, allowing the 'cliff' of the down wave to pass below them."

The picture switched over to a recording of a familiar girl of about 12.

The lucky girl who had miraculously survived was known to the two in the apartment as Patricia Birdway.

"It really is quite a mystery. There was no sign of an earthquake, so the cause of those two sudden waves has greatly roused my curiosity, not to mention the curiosity of every other scientist in the world. There are just so many mysteries left in this world! This is why I can't stop loving oceanology! Oh, sis, Mark, are you watching?"

Birdway did not even glance over at the screen. Instead, she simply remained standing dauntingly atop the Japanese kotatsu while staring down at Mark Space.

"So a massive amount of bubbles was mixed in with the seawater below the Blue Research to explosively increase the volume of the water. The ship was lifted up with simple explosive force rather than with the buoyancy of the water. I suppose that is a way of manipulating the ocean surface with only the element of wind and air."

A dark aura exploded out from Birdway.

Her displeasure was on full display.

"It seems some idiot called in an idol of an angel to crush a single freelance magician and then secretly lifted the world's largest marine resources survey ship to keep its crew from falling into the down wave. This idiot saved those people despite doing so also interfering with Academy City's plan and destroying the Anglican Church's pride. Hmm."

A science magazine fell to the floor opened to an article titled "Miraculous Survival! The Marine Resources Survey Ship was lifted up by a Sudden Tsunami!!" The incident was causing quite an uproar even in a magazine read by scientists around the world.

It was similar to when a stone shaped like a human face had been found on Mars.

“But to be honest, I am surprised you managed to do all that with just the swords suit of the minor arcana. Now then…What am I to do with you?”

“U-um…” Mark averted his gaze while sweating profusely and sitting in the Japanese seiza style (perhaps because Birdway was standing atop a Japanese kotatsu). “B-boss, the mission you ordered me on was to make sure Miss Patricia escaped from the Blue Research without getting caught up in the attack. I believe I accomplished that…”

“…”

“U-um, what are you going to do to me?”

Mark was afraid to ask, but he had to know.

In response, Birdway grinned.

“Execute you.”

“Ughph!? W-w-w-w-wait a second, boss! Isn’t that a tad extreme!? Wait, what are you pulling out from under the kotatsu!?”

“Can’t you tell? It’s a fluffy glove-style tickling massage machine. Isn’t it nice how it somehow looks like the front paw of a white rabbit? Tah dah. It’s the Super Fluffy Ultra Cute Miracle Massacre Mincemeat Lovey-Dovey Pretty White Bunny Glove☆!!”

“D-did you just say ‘massacre’ and ‘mincemeat’ in the middle of a cute name, boss!? That thing looks like it will kill me instantly in one hit!! You can’t fool me by moving your wrist around cutely like that!!”

“…You certainly have a poor opinion of rabbits. Would a different animal have been better?”

“Well, everyone knows puppies are the cutest animals in the world, but that’s not the main issue here!! What true power does that massager hold!?”

Mark desperately tried to bring the conversation back on track, but Birdway only continued moving her wrist while tilting her head to the side and saying “pyon pyon”. However, the light in her eyes was a carnivorous one unbefitting of a rabbit. Mark paled as he realized he would be more than just killed if his boss seriously used that item on him. He started trying to point out his positive points.

“B-but in all the confusion, I destroyed all of the major systems on the Blue Research! It can no longer search for the drilling point!! S-so we do not need to worry about the whole market thing anymore, right?”

“Hmph. The Portuguese cabal was destroyed yesterday. Some person who must have felt similarly to you seems to have done something about it.”

“Boss!! You are such a kind person!!”

“Ah, you idiot!! I-I never said it was me!! Don’t make strange misunderstandings and then try to hug me with tears in your eyes!! It’s creepy!! And you can’t fool me!”

Mark froze in place.

Birdway controlled her breathing in order to bring her tone back to normal before continuing.

“Due to your unauthorized actions, Academy City and the Anglican Church view the entire Dawn-Covered Sunlight as having interfered. Do you even know what diplomacy is? Thanks to this, the power balance I worked so hard to create has been destroyed. You need to pay for that.”

“N-no! I am prepared to accept a penalty, but please let it be anything but that white bunny thing! That thing would definitely put my death somewhere around #3 on a list of most humorous causes of death!!”

“I just want to try out this toy I found in Portugal. It seems they had it made to prevent any insubordination and it has never actually been used. And you know how people are, right? When we hear something has never been used, we want to try it out.”

“Eeeeee!? So that thing is some dangerous tool that was not even designed to be used on people!? At least a proper torture device would be made so it would not accidentally kill the person! And if you found it in Portugal, then you are just as kind as I thought!!”

“Agh, shut up! I told you it wasn’t me. If you’re going to make so much noise, at least make it due to your screams. …Oh, I just can’t wait. Just imagining how the fool who defied me will twitch around is enough to get me excited.”

For some reason, Birdway put one hand on her cheek and smiled while blushing slightly. She then checked on the rabbit paw-shaped massacre massage glove on her hand.

“Oh, right. There was something I wanted to check with you. I heard some rumor about that the boss of the Dawn-Colored Sunlight rubbing a strange cream on her breasts which made her areola grow huge, attaching bowl-like items to her breasts which turned them a strange bluish-purple, and finally having her bust size grow to five meters and to grow 8 nipples, making her breasts look something like Gatling guns. I am so uneducated that I did not understand it at all, so I would like for you to tell me everything you know about it.”

“Gyaaaaahhh!! *This* is where you give your most evil expression!? W-wait, boss! It would just be too much for this legendary giant breasted Birdway to be the end of me!! At least give me the kind of death that would be spoken of in cheap bars, making women fall in love with me!”

“No, you must be executed immediately.”

Along with some horrible noises, humorous screams reverberated through the apartment.

Mark Space never did learn that Patricia stopped by at that time with a homemade apple pie and deemed him a person with “pitiable tastes” upon seeing the expression unbefitting of a grown man on his face as he trembled in an odd pose.

上条当麻

とある魔術の禁書目録（インデックス）SP

KAMIJOU TOUMA

"...Ksshh...Can you...hear this? ...Is this...ksshh...language...you...ksshh...speak? My...ksshh...from Earth to Mars...ksshh..."

A normal high school student named Kamijou Touma leaned against the wall and looked down at his cell phone. He was watching the evening news on it.

"That is the result gained from analysis of the signal coming from the direction of Mars. No official announcement has been made by the special committee in Academy City's District 23 and speculation is rampant."

A girl stood next to Kamijou.

The girl peering at his cell phone had the odd name of Index. She had white skin, a short build, long silver hair that reached her waist, and green eyes. She also wore a showy white nun's habit with gold embroidery that was reminiscent of a nouveau riche teacup. She would have stood out anywhere.

She trembled while watching the news.

"Aliens... There really are octopus-like aliens!!"

"Ehh...?" said Kamijou (an alien denier) in an exhausted voice within a pristine, white corridor.

Index (an alien believer) had been acting like that ever since that news had first come out a few days prior. UFOs and aliens may have seemed scientific, but it seemed wrong to seriously say that octopus-like aliens or silver aliens with huge heads were part of the science side.

Even if it was from a proper news organization, things were often reported before credible proof had been obtained. There were all sorts of stories about UFO photos being faked.

However, Index's green eyes were opened wide.

“Since the message was in Japanese, they might be coming here soon. O-oh, no. There’s nothing in my 103,000 grimoires about what to say when you meet an octopus alien!!”

“Ehh…?” said Kamijou in a disheartened voice.

Index may have been able to use her knowledge from over 100,000 grimoires to defeat nasty magicians, but she did not know much when it came to aerospace concepts.

(She isn’t going to start saying something about nearby crop circles being linked to the sinking of Atlantis, is she?)

Kamijou looked down at the digital clock displayed at the edge of his cell phone’s screen.

It was 8:10 PM.

(She’s late. How long do those preparations take?)

Just as he thought that, he heard footsteps from further back in the building. Kamijou and Index looked over and saw a woman of about 20 approaching.

She was out of breath.

“Sorry, young Kamijou. The preparations took longer than I expected!”

“So you got the car ready, Fleiss-san?”

“Yes, somehow or other. The engine’s already started. C’mon, we need to get out of here!!”

Kamijou and Index followed the older Fleiss down the dark passageway. On the way, Kamijou glanced out a window. What he saw was not the normal nighttime scenery of the city.

He saw special vehicles arranged to surround the building. Lights much brighter than the ones used in theatres were pointed toward the building, making it difficult to see out, but he could see people moving about and watching the building through the gaps in the light.

(…Can we really escape from this?)

Kamijou was half in shock.

The three of them were currently on the run from Academy City.

♦

It had all started with what Index had said a few hours earlier after dinner.

Normally, the girl only asked for dessert or to have tempura in her udon, but she had given a rare request that could have even been called romantic: I want to see some pretty stars. Needless to say, Kamijou had been shocked.

Academy City had been created out of the western portion of Tokyo, so it gave the image of being level all the way across. However, District 21 was exceptionally mountainous as it held the many dams that acted as the city's water sources. The elevation only reached about 200 meters, but the stars could be seen more clearly there than in the city with its streetlights and neon. As such, they headed there.

Their destination was an observatory at the top of one of those slopes.

It was a fairly nice observatory that even had a mid-range radio telescope, but it was open to the public. It even had some of the kind of telescope on any popular elevated tourist destination that could be used for a limited amount of time for 100 yen.

The observatory was filled with people enjoying their evening and Kamijou assumed it was due to the news about Mars (although he had no idea how many people normally went there).

However, a battle had suddenly broken out between Anti-Skill, an organization that acted both as police and special forces within Academy City, and Fleiss-san, a woman with the strange occupation of "magician". (Anti-Skill did not know of magic, so they seemed to be treating her as a mere terrorist.) Apparently Anti-Skill had found Fleiss-san mixed in with the normal people in the observatory and a skirmish had broken out.

It was a battle between science and magic.

That was a problem, but it was not too far out of hand. This one would resolve itself. There were plenty of incidents and battles in the world, but you just had to make sure you did not get involved in them. There was no need to stick one's nose in other people's business. That was why Kamijou and Index just needed to escape to a safe place and not take part in that ridiculous battle.

The problem was…

"Oh, c'mon… But wow. That really is a heated battle. Well, I have a bad feeling about this, so let's go hide."

"Mh, Touma! That expensive-looking suit of armor is about to fall over!!"

"Ahh!! Hoo, got the spear at the last second!!"

And like that, Kamijou was holding the thick spear that had fallen from the overly expensive and in-the-way suit of armor. Kamijou was breathing a sigh of relief that the nouveau riche antique was not damaged when…

"…"

A few Anti-Skill members suddenly looked over at him.

One of them turned toward his radio and said something.

"I've spotted reinforcements for the target!! He's armed with a heavy-looking spear, possibly to use against our bulletproof vests! He looks ready to attack!!"

"Ehh!? W-wait a second…!! Hey, magician!! Don't get that hopeful look on your face!! I'm not trying to join in…!!"

"The new target has a medium build and black, spiky hair! …There could be other terrorists around. We should assume we're up against a group here!!"

"Eeee!? You've got it all wrong, Anti-Skill-san! We have nothing to do with that kind of supernatural fighter…Gaaahhhhh!?"

Kamijou's sentence turned into some sort of yell at the end because he only got a stream of bullets as a response and had to frantically grab Index's hand and head for cover. They were rubber bullets for suppressing riots, but they would still hurt if they hit you. It was not a good idea to just stand there when a shower of them was headed your way.

During all that, the rest of the crowd was quickly evacuated from the observatory guided by Anti-Skill. Thanks to that, Kamijou, Index, and the mysterious magician were the only three left inside. Kamijou wanted to yell at Anti-Skill telling them to at least treat him like he was the magician's hostage, but it seemed they were just planning to shoot first and ask questions later.

"Sorry about that. It looks like I've gotten you wrapped up in all sorts of trouble."

"Oh, yes, I suppose so. I've had a lot of practice though, so I can handle this much misfortune."

And so they ended up carrying out their escape plan with Fleiss-san, the magician that had suddenly started talking to them like she knew them.

There was no real reason Kamijou had to escape, but he had a feeling misfortune would rear its ugly head if he did not get to some place where he could safely clear up the misunderstandings. If he simply headed out with his hands up, he could just see someone's finger slipping and shooting him accidentally.

♦

It seemed Fleiss-san could drive.

The metal shutter sealing a staff garage burst open and a 4WD wagon-type off road vehicle roared out. Since Anti-Skill was only planning on capturing rather than killing, they were not sure whether to attack or run away. During that hesitation, the off road vehicle Fleiss-san was driving slammed into the gap between two Anti-Skill vehicles and forced its way through the blockade.

The mountain road 200 meters up made many twists and turns, but it did not continue for long. They made it to the urban area in no time at all.

Of course, that was not enough to escape pursuit.

"They're after us!! And they have a ton of cars!!" shouted Kamijou as he looked out the back from the back seat.

Academy City was a city that artificially created psychic powers and Kamijou's right hand held a special power called Imagine Breaker that could negate any supernatural phenomenon whether it was magic or psychic in nature, but it would be of no help in that situation.

Index's eyes darted about following the scenery whizzing by out the window while Fleiss-san looked back with a bitter expression using the rearview mirror.

"This is not good. I want to do something about it, but I can't take my hands off the wheel. You, boy. Could you lend a hand to shake them off our tail?"

"Why do I have to do that!?"

"Because you've gotten wrapped up in this with me."

"…!! Dammit, what do you want me to do!?" Kamijou said in desperation.

Fleiss-san must have taken that as a good answer because she nodded once and pressed some button with a smile.

"Well, first open the door in the back for loading and unloading luggage. Yes, the one that's like the trunk on a car."

"L-like this?"

"You, nun. Could you hand that boy the silver case over there near your ass?"

"O-okay. Understood."

“Now open the case. There should be two tubes inside. Push them together and half rotate one to lock them together. Then push that round mass in the end.”

“Hm? Hmm? It’s all jumbled up and hard to understand…”

“Touma, take those two tubes, stick them together, and rotate one only halfway around. Then stick that round mass in the front.”

“Ohh, got it, got it. Thanks, Index. That perfect memory of yours can really come in handy.”

“Next, hold it up by resting it on your shoulder and press the red button on the top. A laser will come out, so aim the red light for the hood of one of the pursuing cars. Once that’s done, just pull the trigger.”

“Hm? Hmm?”

“C’mon, Touma. Raise it up and press the red button on top. Something called a laser will come out, so make the red light hit the car’s hood. Once you’ve done all that, you just have to pull the trigger.”

“Oh, I get it, I get it. You really are useful to have around, Index. Okay, so I just have to do this right? …Hm? Trigger???”

Kamijou looked confused, but his index finger had already begun to move.

The noise of something being fired exploded out.

The shock knocked Kamijou onto his back and propelled the round mass out the front.

The round mass opened up in midair, creating a giant 5 meter square net. The pursuing Anti-Skill vehicle frantically tried to avoid it, but the net covered the entire car. On top of that, the tire caught the edge of the net, sending the car swerving to the side with a slipping noise.

Kamijou watched in shock as the car slammed into a guardrail.

He then looked back to the tube he was holding.

“What? What is this thing!? What the hell is this thing!!?”

“It seems to be a special gun used to capture wild animals.”

“I thought you were a magician. Why do you know so much about this clearly scientific weapon!?”

“District 21 is a mountainous area, so I assume it’s a piece of equipment they need for whatever they do here. Japan really is a kind country. They won’t carelessly kill their wild animals any more than their criminals.”

“I’ll ignore that you never answered my question, but didn’t you say something earlier about being sorry you got us wrapped up in this!?”

“Touma, word for word, what she said was, ‘Sorry about that. It looks like I’ve gotten you wrapped up in all sorts of trouble.’”

“Thanks again, Index!! Anyway, you damn magician!! How about you tell me just what the hell is going on!?”

“Ha ha ha. You need to hurry up and load the next shot. We can’t get away unless you take all of them out.”

“Fuck that!! Why do I have to do that…!?”

“I don’t think you have much of a choice. Now that you’ve taken out one of the cars, they look like they’ve gotten serious. They might start using actual bullets now.”

“…!?”

With Kamijou at a loss for words, the car chase entered its second round.

With tears in his eyes, Kamijou picked back up the special gun when he saw one of the pursuing vehicles’ windows open and a hand stick out while holding what was clearly a giant magnum handgun.

♦

A girl held a radio to her ear.

Her age was about the same as Kamijou’s, but she looked oddly sexy. She was wearing a blazer from some school, but it looked unnatural on her. Some might have referred to her as an “adult upperclassman”, a strange creature that every school seemed to have one of. However, no one there was about to say that.

The girl giggled.

Her radio was picking up signals on the frequency used by Anti-Skill. However, the voices coming from the radio were rather unprofessional for an organization like that. Normally, the keepers of the peace would not be saying things like, “I’m gonna fucking kill that spiky-haired brat!”

After listening to that for a while, the girl finally removed the radio from her ear.

She then spoke to the various figures around her.

“As expected, it seems normal Anti-Skill is not going to be enough for this.”

“Are we going, Professor Bisai?”

“Yes, we have no other choice.”

♦

Kamijou Touma’s eyes were glazed over.

The vehicle Fleiss-san had been driving was parked inside an industrial area within District 17. The district was filled with mostly automated factories and they had hidden the vehicle and themselves in the gap between buildings. Countless pipes ran by overhead making it a good spot to hide from the satellite.

Kamijou was curled up in the dark alley and was not moving. A stray cat that normally would not approach people walked over to him, rolled on its back, and held out its paws as if to say, “Oh, fine then. Here.”

(Anti-Skill is made up of Academy City teachers. That means they’ll definitely have their eyes on me now. Uuh…And it’s hard enough just being a Level 0! Uuuuuhhhh!!)

Kamijou’s feelings exploded while he squeezed the stray cat’s paws and he went beyond rubbing the cat’s stomach and instead buried his face in its soft fur. In return, he got a nice slash from its claws along his cheek and was left writhing about in the dirty alleyway. Fleiss-san, the magician, laughed upon seeing that.

“Don’t get so down. I thought you did quite well.”

“…”

“Really, though. I was shocked when you managed to bring that pursuit helicopter down with only that net gun. You really must have a talent for that kind of thing to get the net caught in the rotor like that.”

“That doesn’t make me happy!! What kind of talent is that anyway!? How is that ever going to be useful in normal life!?” Kamijou shouted back, but Fleiss-san must have been used to getting others caught up in dangerous situations because she showed no sign of being bothered by it.

“Now then. How can we turn this situation around? Do either of you have any ideas?”

“I may be standing here in the middle of all this chaos, but this isn’t what I want to do!! I’d rather just abandon you here!! You’re clearly the kind of person that would find a way out on her own! You’re powerful enough that there’s no need for me to help you!! Why are things always like this always happening around Kamijou-san!? I just don’t want to help you anymore!!”

“I see. But at this rate, Anti-Skill will be aiming for you with real bullets, too.”

“…”

“It would be safer for you if we worked together. Don’t worry. I’ll make sure to send you back to your normal life.”

Kamijou did not feel he could trust her at all since she had been the cause of it all, but she simply continued on giving no sign of caring about the serious crisis of possible suspension from school he was facing as a resident of Academy City.

“By the way, do you two know about the signal from Mars that has been causing quite a stir lately?”

“Y-you mean the thing about the octopus aliens!? So they really are coming to Japan!! Just to be safe, we should go buy a bunch of snacks for guests!!”

“Ehh…?”

Kamijou, the alien denier, was already tired of all that talk, but Fleiss-san spoke up in the tone of an older neighborhood girl giving a kind warning to a child.

“Oh, but I thought this was a science side issue.”

“…No, you guys on the magic side can have the little greys,” said Kamijou casually.

“The octopus aliens might get lost when they first come to Earth!! That’s why we need to help out if they ask us for directions!!” said Index, but the other two ignored her.

“Hmm, so do you really think there is no life on Mars? How do you explain that signal otherwise?”

“Life, hm? That question really depends on what level of life you’re talking about, but I at least doubt there are any octopus-like aliens or little greys. Sure, they’re talking about some signal possibly having come from there, but I can’t say for sure until I’ve seen it myself.”

“So what if we lower the level down to microbial life?”

“Mhh,” grumbled Kamijou as he thought.

Speaking purely of life on Earth, there were plenty of strange creatures like water bears that could apparently live anywhere from 150 degrees Celsius on down to -270 degrees Celsius.

But…

“There may be microbes that could live in Mars’s environment, but I just don’t know enough about Mars to say whether life could have occurred there. …In the planet’s current state, the answer would definitely be no, though.”

“True, but there is no need for life to naturally form on Mars.”

“?”

Kamijou looked confused and Fleiss-san laughed.

“Do you know what attached microbes are?”

“…No, and I’m pretty sure that term would never come up in a normal conversation.”

“I don’t even know what you mean by microbe,” added Index.

“And aren’t you supposed to be from the magic side?” asked Kamijou, but Fleiss-san merely turned the question aside.

“The unmanned probes used for geological surveys of Mars are of course built on Earth and sent to Mars on a rocket, right? Well, sometimes those probes land on Mars with microbes from Earth still attached.”

“Oh,” said Kamijou, nodding in understanding.

That was indeed a way that it was possible for tough microbes like water bears to end up on Mars. They may not have a proper food chain allowing them to endure, but that would at least bring life to Mars for a short period of time.

“Also, recent probes have become much more complex. Small amounts of water are loaded onboard in order to care for the lenses for the geological survey and oxygen tanks are installed in the ignition device for the small boosters allowing for a soft landing. Both of those could be helpful in allowing microbes to survive.”

Index was still tilting her head to the side with question marks above it, but Kamijou was saying things like “Oh, wow. SF is so cool!!” in admiration. However, a question suddenly popped into his head.

“But this uproar is over a communications signal being sent from Mars. Even if tough microbes were sent to Mars from Earth, the microbes couldn’t do something like that.”

“Well, as for the means of transmitting the signal,” said Fleiss-san as she spun her finger around while pointing it up into the night sky. “I think it could have been one of the probes’ antennae. The probes couldn’t exactly function without some kind of equipment to send data back to Earth.”

“So it’s all stuff from Earth…”

Kamijou’s shoulders drooped as all of his dreams were shattered. He had been insisting that it could not be aliens, but he may have actually had some strange expectations just like Index.

Speaking of Index…

“Touma, what are microbes?”

“Hey, wait a second. You said the transmission was sent with the probe’s transmission antenna, but I thought you said there were only microbes on Mars? Can they even use the equipment on the probes? In fact, do microbes even have the ability to think and say things?”

“Hmm…” said Fleiss-san with her arms crossed and a troubled expression on her face.

However, that was not because she did not have an answer.

“This is all science side stuff and I’m not too knowledgeable about it, so I’m a bit hesitant to say it.”

“?”

“What if I told you the microbes underwent a different path of evolution in Mars’s environment than they would have on Earth?”

“S-so you’re saying these Earth microbe things were turned into octopus aliens by the mysterious powers of Mars!?” said Index excitedly

“Ehh…?”

The door in Kamijou’s heart that had started to open suddenly slammed shut.

Fleiss-san laughed and shook her hands back and forth.

“No ridiculous evolution like that is needed. Microbes use thin hairs called cilia to move, right? All that is needed would be a little change to the pattern with which they move those thin hairs.”

“…Hey. What does the movement of their hairs have to do with their intelligence?”

“Have you heard of spring computers? They carry out calculations by moving small rod-shaped materials using electrical means. I believe they represent 1s and 0s with protrusions and indentations. Anyway, the actual computer is constructed from an aggregation of those rod-shaped materials on a micrometer scale. That matches perfectly with the size of the cilia.”

“…”

Kamijou had an idea where she was going with that.

“Don’t tell me you’re trying to say these microbes use vibrations of their cilia to carry out some form of high speed calculation…”

“Even if they did head down a different path of evolution than normal, the amount of calculation power of a single microbe would be limited. Most likely, a group of the microbes gathers together and accomplishes what we would call ‘thought’ by performing calculations in parallel. I wonder if it was the environment of Mars that changed them.” Fleiss-san sighed. “They evolved to adapt to the environment of Mars and gained this high level calculation ability. It may have been because of the various signals constantly sent to the probe from the observation posts on Earth that they had various kinds of information inputted into them. Thanks to that, this collection of microbes that was nothing more than a collection of high-level calculation ability gained thought patterns similar to those of humans.”

“So it isn’t octopus aliens?” asked Index, but Kamijou had a feeling he had just been told something either amazing or crazy.

Ignoring their reactions, Fleiss-san continued.

“The method of conveying signals between each individual microbe is most likely vibrations. Think of it as like an advanced version of an ant’s antennae. They could give and receive information via the contact of vibrating cilia.”

Kamijou gulped.

Of course, there was a kind of logic to what Fleiss-san was saying, but she had no actual proof. However, either because Fleiss-san’s manner of speaking was very true to life or because she continued to mix in examples of things close to Kamijou or things he had heard of, he got a strange sense that what she said might actually be true.

“S-so you’re saying they’re the ones that sent the signal to Earth!? But why!?”

“Well…” Fleiss-san did not hesitate as she continued to speak smoothly.

She was likely about to add some more support to give her argument more credibility.

Kamijou felt as if he were about to witness a moment akin to the one in which universal gravitation was proven.

And then Fleiss-san spoke…

“I honestly have no idea.”

In that instant, Kamijou was unable to actually fall over, so he was stuck trembling while still holding his breath in an awkward pose just barely on the line between falling over and not falling over.

While still in that pose, Kamijou shouted out.

“Why you-…Damn yo-…What the hell!? You can’t just do that after coming that far!! Please let Kamijou-san take a trip into a universe filled with mystery and romance!! C’mon, my heart was ready to escape the atmosphere!!”

“Oh, um…sorry. I really am just someone from the magic side, so I don’t know that much about science…”

“No! You do not get to say that after all that!! I-I have to know. Now I have to know!! I thought I was going to get a glimpse at the unique thought patterns of a new form of life!!”

Kamijou curled up on the ground, pounded his fist, and sobbed. Seeing that, Fleiss-san placed a kind hand on his shoulder.

“I’m sure they wanted to see where they came from…or something like that…I guess…maybe…”

“Waahhh!! Now you’re just trying to get out of this by telling me some crap you just made up!!”

Kamijou writhed about while being attacked by horrible indigestion due to the way Fleiss-san’s explanation had ended. However, doing that would not change the fact that Fleiss-san’s knowledge on the subject had dried up.

Kamijou ended up simply lying on the dirty ground and the stray cat approached him again. The cat held out its paw to him as if saying, “What is it boy? Are you troubled again?” After squeezing the cat’s paw for a bit, Kamijou’s mind had recovered enough for him to ask Fleiss-san a question.

“By the way, what was the point of the whole attached microbe thing?”

“? What do you mean?”

“Is there a connection between this strange life form on Mars and why Anti-Skill is after you?”

“Oh, that. Yes, there is a connection.”

“?”

“Most likely, Academy City doesn’t like what I’m after.”

“Which is?”

“Well…” Fleiss-san nodded and grinned. “My goal is to exterminate those thinking microbes.”

♦

Exterminate them.

Fleiss-san’s description of her objective was direct and to the point.

Index still looked confused because she had no clear idea what a microbe was. Kamijou could not imagine microbes with thought processes on the same level as a human, but there was something he had to ask.

“Exterminate? You mean…”

“Yes.”

“But…is that really okay? Even if these microbes actually exist, I have no idea what kind of creature they are, but they are still living things. They may be unknown and mysterious, but they haven’t done anything wrong. According to your theory, all they’ve done is use the probe’s communications equipment to try to talk to us.”

“The people of this country certainly have a wealth of sensitivity.” Fleiss-san sighed and lightly brushed up her bangs. “I’d heard that the Japanese would get feelings for robots, pets, and even drawings on paper… I guess you’re one of those people. Are you forgetting that we’re talking about microbes here? Whenever you wash your hands with soap, you kill them by the tens of thousands.”

“But…” Kamijou trailed off.

It was true that the birth and actions of an independent intelligent life form on Mars could create various problems. The two sides of the Earth, science and magic, could possibly get into a fight over whose jurisdiction it fell under. Thinking along those lines, the attached microbes on Mars could possibly be nothing more than the sparks that start a war.

But even so, the microbes themselves were not planning to conquer the world like something from a cheap SF movie. Nor were they some kind of deadly virus. Was it really right for the humans of Earth to exterminate them for their own purposes? If they had feelings, would it be wrong to kill them, but otherwise it would be okay? How advanced a life form did it have to be before it changed from "extermination" to "murder"? Kamijou felt that was a difficult line to draw. However, he did not like it on a purely intuitive level. It was a sentimental opinion with no real proof, but those microbes had gained thought on a planet that was otherwise barren. He wanted to know what feelings had been behind sending that signal to Earth. What his exceedingly egotistical sensitivity as a human told him made him not want to use soap ever again.

Kamijou thought for a bit, but those philosophical questions were not something he would resolve any time soon.

Also, Fleiss-san was not going to actually carry out that extermination right that moment.

After all…

"How are you planning on killing these microbes? Are you going to fire a missile at Mars or something? You aren't actually planning to go to Mars yourself, right?"

"…"

Fleiss-san gave no response to that question.

She leaned against the door of the vehicle hidden between buildings.

"At any rate, what I must do remains the same. *I have come up with a plan for that and have made all the necessary preparations*. You need to realize that, as a magician from the magic side, I had to be prepared to go through with this from the moment I set foot in Academy City, the headquarters of the science side."

Her tone was extremely serious. Kamijou didn't want to think it was true, but it was possible Academy City had some kind of technology that could attack the surface of Mars.

However, Kamijou never got a chance to ask about it.

Something else interfered.

He heard a light metallic noise.

It came from down at his feet. He looked down and saw a metal cylinder about the size of a coffee can. However, it did not have pull tab like a can of coffee would. Nor did it have an opening to drink from. Instead, the top of the cylinder had a device to hold a pin, but the pin itself was gone.

Kamijou's mind blanked.

He had just realized what had been thrown toward them.

And the English words written on the side of the cylinder entered his vision.

Stun Grenade.

"...!?"

He did not even have time to shout out.

An explosive noise like a high pitched scream and a sun-like flash of pure white light exploded through his various senses. A stun grenade did nothing but make its target falter due to the powerful light and noise, but at such a close range, Kamijou felt like he had been hit hard on the head and was knocked to the dirty ground.

Some random delinquents in the area would not have that kind of device.

That meant...

(Shit!! Has Anti-Skill caught up to us!?)

The light and noise had already disappeared, but an intense afterimage was burned into Kamijou's eyes and a ringing in his ears seemed to follow him around. Even after blinking a few times and shaking his head, his vision was still mostly gone.

(Index!! Fleiss-san!!)

Kamijou cried out, but he could not hear his own voice. They may have responded, but Kamijou could not hear anything.

His vision was warped as if some powerful glasses had been forced over his eyes, but he could see a number of legs. He could tell some people were approaching, but his ears had not recovered enough to hear their footsteps. He just barely managed to notice that the approaching figures were holding something. They were most likely guns. If he stayed there, he would either be captured or shot, but his semicircular canals must have been taken out along with his sense of hearing, so his legs would not move as he wanted them to.

Suddenly…

"…The established five colors symbolize the five peaks. Therefore, the opposing five complementary colors become that which amplifies the elements of the five peaks."

Kamijou's hearing had been destroyed by the stun grenade, but he heard a smooth female voice.

It belonged to Fleiss-san.

"A red background bordered with a green outline. Triangle of Tejas, bring forth your great natural power by way of that emphasized symbol!!"

If Kamijou's vision had been working properly, he would have been able to see the following.

Fleiss-san lit an oil lighter in one hand and pulled out a green card with her other hand. The card looked like something a soccer referee might have and she held it between her index finger and middle finger. She waved it horizontally as if to slice the small flame of the lighter in two.

A great noise exploded out.

An orange explosion burst out. The highly directional explosion did not even come close to charring Fleiss-san, Kamijou, Index, or even the walls of the buildings to the right and left, but it accurately blasted the approaching enemies out of the alleyway.

"Young Kamijou and the nun, are you okay?" asked Fleiss-san.

Kamijou and Index nodded while staggering around.

And then…

"Tch. Now you've done it, you and your damn analog magic," said a voice.

Kamijou's senses were finally recovering after the blast from the stun grenade.

The men who had been knocked away and to the ground by the strange blast were not from Anti-Skill, but they had a different type of professional bulletproof vest on. And standing in the center of the collapsed men was a lone girl about the same age as Kamijou.

Seeing the girl, Fleiss-san said, "Bisai Otome. Not bad, getting put in charge of that research at your age."

"If you know who I am, then I can make a good guess as to what you're after."

The girl Fleiss-san had called Bisai was wearing a blazer that was likely from some school uniform, but she had a bewitching aura to her that made it seem unnatural on her. She held something like an especially long and narrow instrument case in her hand. Kamijou thought it might have had some old instrument in it, but he was wrong.

"Since you've brought out those analog skills of yours, you can't complain if I bring out my digital version."

The girl undid the latch and pulled something out of the long, narrow case.

"…A whip?"

Kamijou was confused.

It was a black leather whip about a meter long. Bisai held the tennis racket-like grip and lightly waved it about a few times as if testing it out.

Seeing the irregular weapon, Kamijou almost groaned.

"Who are you? You don't look like you're an esper student from Judgment, but I thought Anti-Skill was only made up of teachers."

"Oh, dear." The girl held the whip in one hand and looked over at Fleiss-san rather than Kamijou. "You get help from unrelated people and you don't even explain the situation to them? You analog magic users certainly do play dirty. From the look of you, you might even be mistakenly thinking you're doing the right thing."

"Quiet," cut in Fleiss-san. "You don't understand how frightening a thing they are. I must exterminate them before they can spread across the Earth."

"What do you mean by 'them'…?" asked Index with a frown.

Kamijou had his own questions.

He did not know what organization the girl with the whip belonged to, but Fleiss-san had said she was trying to kill the microbes on Mars. However, their conversation did not seem to quite match up with that.

However, Fleiss-san quickly cleared all that up.

"She wanted to investigate the microbes on Mars as quickly as possible, so she tried to create the same thing here on Earth. The Martian microbes originated from microbes here on Earth, so she decided it would be faster to take the original microbes and have them evolve in an environment created to be the same as on Mars."

"Don't put it like that. We have actually managed a certain level of success."

“Success? All you’ve managed to do is create microbes fertile enough to survive in the Martian environment. They have not gained any calculation ability.”

“…”

“If those things end up in Earth’s environment, they will cover the planet in no time at all. They are not some thinking being. Just like how the irregular production of plankton in a red tide causes serious damage to the fish, they would damage all other life on the planet.”

Kamijou finally understood what Fleiss-san’s objective was.

The microbes she wanted to kill were not the same ones that had sent the signal from Mars. They were the microscopic mutants Bisai Otome had secretly created on Earth months prior.

“That’s quite some second-hand information. I don’t know who told you that, but you only fear science because you do not understand it.” Bisai did not seem worried. “They do not have the ability to threaten the Earth. And even if they did, our storage methods are perfect.”

“Do you really think I’m going to believe you?”

“I don’t care if you do or not. Either way, all three of you are going to be defeated here.”

With a thin smile, Bisai lightly swung the whip in her hand.

That’s right, a whip.

No matter what technology it used, it was still basically a tool for striking. Even if it could be used for torture, it still did not seem like a combat weapon. The men around her holding guns seemed much better armed yet Fleiss-san had easily defeated them.

Red, green, blue, yellow. Fleiss-san spread out colorful cards like a fan and decided to take the initiative while keeping a cautious eye on the situation. She chose one card from the set and swiftly began activating her magic.

But….

With a sharp noise, the card was knocked from Fleiss-san’s hand.

There was a distance of about 10 meters between Bisai and Fleiss-san and Bisai’s whip was only about a meter long including the grip.

And yet…

“!?”

Fleiss-san drew her hand back in shock and Bisai swung the black whip through the air as if attacking a second and third time. That was all it took to create a sharp snapping noise. A red swollen area ran across on Fleiss-san's wrist and all the cards she held scattered about. A red line also appeared on her white cheek. With a tremendous explosion of noise as if from a whip, Fleiss-san's body was easily blown away and struck the alley wall.

"Fleiss-san!!"

Kamijou was not quite sure what was going on, but he still ran over to the collapsed woman. Index also tried to approach her, but the crack of the whip exploded between Kamijou and Index as if to tear them apart.

(How...?)

Kamijou looked over at Bisai.

(Actually, what is even happening...!?)

"A word of warning," the girl said with a giggle. She clenched the whip's grip in her right hand, lightly gripped the side of the whip with her left hand, and stretched it. "This was originally developed to deal with wild animals in the mountainous area of District 21. In other words, it was not made to be used on humans. If you do not make sure to avoid it, you may end up seeing first hand just how soft the human body is."

"Kh!?"

Kamijou grabbed Index's hand and started to move back despite not knowing the whip's range.

However, Bisai was faster.

She did not swing the whip. She may have been trying to stop Kamijou and Index, but she stuck her hand into her skirt's pocket, pulled out something like a coffee can, and tossed it toward them.

It was a stun grenade.

"Dammit!!"

Kamijou immediately closed his eyes and covered his face with his arm. However, the intense white flash seemed to pierce straight through and stab into his retinas. The amount of light was simply too great.

(Shit, how can she just keep using these? Does she have some kind of special color contacts or something!?)

However, he did not even have time to click his tongue.

Either his eyes had gotten used to it a bit after the first blast or covering his face with his arm had been somewhat effective because the stun grenade had not been as effective as before.

Kamijou was a bit disoriented, but he managed to hide behind some materials lying on the side of the alley.

But the nightmarish whip strikes continued mercilessly.

The crack of the whip exploded out.

By the time Kamijou realized it had struck him on the cheek, he was already collapsed on the ground. Not only was he clearly out of the range of the whip, but the strange strike had circled around behind Kamijou's cover. Bisai was still standing in the same spot. She had not moved a step closer, but the whip had definitely hit Kamijou.

The reason she used a relatively ineffective weapon like a whip most likely lay there.

She would have her subordinates fire their guns and then she would use her whip to attack the enemy once they were trapped hiding behind cover. It was also possible she simply liked that it did not instantly kill her enemy, but not for kind reasons. It seemed more like a sadistic kind of "playing".

More importantly, with the level of skill with the whip she showed, she could easily crush flesh and tear blood vessels. After she had "played" with her target long enough, she could kill them right away.

Bisai Otome's black whip gave her too much of an advantage.

Kamijou glared at her and spoke even as he could taste blood.

"…Is that some kind of psychic power…?"

"Why should I tell you?"

The girl drew the whip tight with both hands, causing the unpleasant creak characteristic of leather. Kamijou noticed some kind of strange heat residing in her narrowed eyes and a chill ran down his spine.

And then…

"!!"

The sound of screeching tires exploded out.

“Fleiss-san!?” Kamijou shouted out without meaning to.

Fleiss-san had climbed aboard the 4WD off road car parked between the buildings and was gripping the steering wheel.

Bisai immediately swung her black whip.

But even if she had a means of expanding its range, it was still a whip to be used on wild animals. It did not hold the power needed to blow up or crush a car. The windshield broke, sparks flew from the door, and the airbag activated needlessly, but the off road car ignored Bisai’s whip and passed by Kamijou and Index.

“Get on. Hurry!!”

They did not need to be told twice. Kamijou jumped toward the passenger side door and Index tried to follow. But…

A sharp crack was heard and Index’s feet must have been hit because she suddenly fell before she reached the car.

Kamijou had been trying to leap into the passenger seat, but he stopped while in an unstable position with his hands grabbing the door and one foot on the step near the tire.

“Inde-…wahh!?”

He heard what sounded like someone clicking her tongue from the driver’s seat and the off road car drove off. Kamijou’s foot slipped from the step and he was stuck hanging from the door. However, something worried him more than the asphalt going by below his feet at high speed.

Still hanging from the door, Kamijou shouted at Fleiss-san.

“You idiot!! Go back!! Index is-!!”

“We can’t!! She started aiming for the tires. If she blows the tires, we’ll all be captured!!”

“I don’t care!! I’m going back even if you’re not…!!”

Kamijou started letting go of the door, but he then heard an odd noise.

He looked over and saw something like a ring of plastic tape connecting his wrist to the frame of the door. It had no connector. It had been melted shut with heat or something.

Fleiss-san held something like a handgun in one hand. It looked less like a military weapon and more like a device used to attach prices to products at a convenience store or supermarket.

On the left and right of the device were openings to emit tape and it looked as if it surrounded objects at point blank range like a stag beetle and melted it shut. It was something like a man catcher.

“This is yet another item used to deal with wild animals. It’s a tape gun used to restrain a captured animal’s legs so it can be safely transported.”

Kamijou immediately tried to remove the restraint on his wrist, but he could not tear it. It looked like a thin string, but it would not budge even when he pulled until his fingers hurt.

“Fleiss-san! You…!!”

“Fighting recklessly will just get us captured, too! If you truly want to save her, you can’t waste what little chance you have!!”

“Dammi-…!!”

Before he could grit his teeth, the off road car backed out of the alleyway and turned 90 degrees. This caused the door to open wide and swing Kamijou’s body with it.

“We have a chance. We just have to believe that!!” said Fleiss-san more to herself than to him.

Hearing that, Kamijou bit his lip until it bled.

♦

Alternating down wide roads and narrow roads and making turns all over the place, Fleiss-san brought the off road car to an underground parking lot for a department store.

The battered car was wrapped in a languid atmosphere. Kamijou leaned back against the passenger seat headrest and Fleiss-san leaned forward, resting her upper body against the steering wheel.

No pursuit seemed to be coming, but they could not relax.

That was obviously because they had left Index behind.

(Dammit…)

Neither of them said anything about Index.

They both knew the situation without having to discuss it and Kamijou already knew what he had to do.

That was why Kamijou asked about something else.

"…Hey. Why did you come to Academy City?"

"Didn't I already explain that?" Fleiss-san turned her head to look at Kamijou while keeping her body leaned against the steering wheel. "A research facility in this city created an environment the same as that on Mars in an attempt to artificially create microbes with the same thought processes as those on Mars. It was a failure, but if they escaped into the atmosphere and started to breed, they would become a threat to all other life, similar to a red tide. So before that can happen…"

"No, not that," Kamijou said, cutting her off.

Fleiss-san lifted herself from the steering wheel with a puzzled look before Kamijou continued.

"Saving the world or protecting all life forms on the Earth…all that stuff is just on too great a scale. Your objective is so spread out that it becomes too thin."

"…"

"At your core, you have to have a more personal, more subjective, and much smaller reason. This reason seems so raw to you that you hesitate to speak of it. That's what I'm asking about. *What are you fighting for?*"

Hearing that, Fleiss-san fell silent.

After a short silence, she slowly started moving her lips.

"Well…" She leaned back in her seat and took a deep breath. "Do you know of a magic cabal called the Dawn that Wipes away Darkness?"

"?"

"No, of course you don't. …Even on the magic side…hell, even in England where Golden-style cabals originated, very few people know of it. That's just how far it has declined. It is a tiny cabal and I am one of its members."

As she spoke, she pulled a few cards out of her pocket. They were similar to the red card or yellow card soccer referees had, but they were red, blue, yellow, and green.

"The spell we use colorizes the five great elements and then indirectly interferes with the five types of power in the natural world by mixing the colors and adding in complementary colors. Basically, it takes the rules of the Tattva color arrangement that spread throughout the Golden-style cabals and rearranges it into four colors that can be used as symbolic weapons."

"??? Umm…?"

Kamijou looked on blankly as Fleiss-san pulled out an oil lighter.

“The basic color of fire is red. Its complementary color is green.”

She held a green card behind the small flame.

“Green emphasizes red, so bringing the card near the flame emphasizes the strength of the flame.”

With a roar, the lighter’s flame grew to a 30 cm pillar of fire.

As Kamijou watched in shock, she brought a red card near the pillar of fire.

“Conversely, red will not work with flames when using this spell. It causes the outlines to become vague which weakens the symbols.”

As if its oil fuel source had been cut off, the pillar of fire disappeared instantly.

“Huh… Magic really is amazing…”

“Not really. This method is almost completely obsolete.”

“Why? Creating and putting out flames is pretty convenient. I bet it could be used in all sorts of ways in a fight.”

Fleiss-san smiled at his ignorant question.

It was a weak smile.

“The magic side is still advancing. There is no longer any need to indirectly add emphasis or add vagueness to the elements. Spells have been developed that directly manipulate the pure element itself. It’s something like the relationship between vacuum tubes and integrated circuits. Vacuum tubes do have their advantages, but making an audio device out of them in this day and age would seem insane.”

Methods with no demand would become obsolete.

Kamijou had no idea how the Dawn that Wipes away Darkness dealt with society and gained their funds, but they had most likely lost their foundation.

“As you said, wanting to save the world or protect all life living here was a lie. That was just a front,” Fleiss-san said self-derisively. “This was really nothing but a promotion. I just wanted to carry out some major job so I could show that our techniques were not useless junk. …This is nothing more than the attempted return match of a loser.”

She most likely knew quite well that vacuum tubes would never return over integrated circuits no matter how much they were used. And even if they did, it would be nothing but straying from the proper path. It would only bring down the overall level of technology in the world.

But…

"…What's so bad about that?"

"?"

"I don't know about magic, but in the world I live in, old things like soy milk and hatsuga genmai sometimes end up back in the spotlight. What's popular and what isn't is not solely determined by what is cutting edge or not," said Kamijou. "And more importantly, I'm relieved to hear that completely ordinary reason. I wouldn't know how to deal with someone so deep they could seriously talk about saving the future of all living things on Earth from humans all the way down to plankton."

"…"

Fleiss-san looked surprised and fell silent.

Kamijou did not wait for her to respond.

He opened the battered passenger door and stepped out into the underground parking lot. Seeing that, Fleiss-san frantically called out.

"Where are you going?"

"Surely you know," he said without turning toward her. "I'm going to save Index."

"You're planning on going alone to face those armed soldiers and that special whip that uses some kind of strange technology? In fact, you don't even know where they went."

"None of that matters." Kamijou held his right fist through the open door and toward Fleiss-san. "Just like you, I'm not going to say I want to protect all life on Earth from humans all the way down to plankton. I have my own completely ordinary reason. They've captured Index and I want to save her. …Simple, isn't it? It's so simple I don't have to worry about ridiculous crap like strategy."

Kamijou did not appear to have any kind of weapon.

He was not wearing a bulletproof vest or blade-resistant suit. He could be killed by a single bullet or even a sharp stick, but he showed no sign of backing down.

His weapon was Imagine Breaker, his right hand that could negate any supernatural power.

"…I'll go alone. You don't need to come with me," he said before walking off.

However, before he made it even a few steps away, he heard a car horn from behind him.

"Get in. I'll go with you."

"You…"

"Just like you decide what to do with your life, I can decide what to do with mine."

♦

Bisai Otome, a girl wielding a strange whip, stood in the darkness where she had dragged Index. She was very near where she had attacked those three in District 17. As it turned out (perhaps obviously), she could not drive. Since the small fries around her had been taken out, she had to wait until backup arrived before she could travel any distance away.

Bisai pulled on Index's arm while the girl had her hands restrained behind her back in handcuffs. Being dragged along in that unnatural pose caused an occasional dull pain to run through her shoulder.

"…Ugh, what a pain," Bisai muttered while holding the instrument case-like object in her other hand. "Because you surrendered before I killed you, I now have to deal with you as a hostage. If only you'd resisted a bit more, so I could have killed you without having to hold back."

"…What are you going to do to me?" asked Index with a serious tone.

Bisai traced her index finger across the case holding the whip and said, "It would probably be fun to make you suffer here, but I need to give my job priority. It would be bad if I was attacked again before the reinforcements arrive, so I'll use you as insurance."

♦

Meanwhile, Kamijou and Fleiss-san were watching them from a distance.

Index and Bisai Otome were inside the grounds of an automatic factory within District 17. Kamijou and Fleiss-san had been able to find Index because she had left hints behind.

"A sigil?" Kamijou had asked when they had returned to the area of the attack to see if there was any clue left behind.

A strange pattern had been drawn on the road surface with a stone or something being used instead of chalk. It did not look quite like writing or a crest. If anything, it looked more like jagged lines.

The lines even intersected similarly to in the number 4.

Fleiss-san crouched down on the ground and said, “Yes, a sigil. This kind is used to symbolize a special cross among Golden-style cabals. And this symbol can also include representations of the 22 characters of the Hebrew alphabet.”

She traced her fingertips across the straight lines it seemed Index had drawn.

“Using that method of representation, the lines in this kind of sigil display a word. Most of the time, it is used to display the name of an angel in order to obtain Telesma.”

“Does this act as some kind of hint?”

“Some angels are in charge of protecting a direction. In other words, she is using the angel’s name to tell us which direction to go.”

They followed the direction indicated by the sigil and found another sigil. It seemed Index had quickly scraped out a sigil for the next direction with her feet on the wall or ground every time they had changed directions. Kamijou left the decoding to Fleiss-san and they followed sigil after sigil until they arrived at Index’s location.

“By the way…” asked Kamijou as he observed the factory grounds through some binoculars they had found in the off road car (possibly for bird watching). “How are you going to destroy the artificial Earth microbes once you find them? Are you just going to burn their container to sterilize them?”

“I’ll use this,” said Fleiss-san as she pulled out a card.

Unlike the red, blue, green, and yellow cards from before, this one was not a single solid color. It had a pattern made up of a few differently colored parts similar to stained glass. The somehow dull hues made the surface look rough.

Kamijou looked at it and frowned.

“A rose…and a cross?”

“This spiritual item was developed by one of the most basic of sects that is older than even the Golden-style. Dried herbs are broken into a powder and consecrated salt is used to create the pattern. It’s a tool used for purification spells.”

“Purification…?”

“Its main use is to prevent food from spoiling. If you think of the arrangement of the five great elements as what is making up an object, then rust, rotting, or decay is caused by an arrangement with poor balance. The aim is to prevent that rotting and decay by readjusting that balance.” Fleiss-san laughed. “But as someone from the science side, I’m sure you know what actually causes food to spoil.”

“Bacteria and other microbes cause them to decompose. That’s why preserved foods are dried or deprived of oxygen in order to keep those life forms from…”

Kamijou trailed off because he had figured it out.

Fleiss-san gave a small nod.

“I doubt the magicians who originally created this kind of spiritual item and spell had any idea things such as microbes existed. After all, that was back during the time of the Renaissance. However, this card still ended up possessing a powerful purification ability in regards to microorganisms. I expect it will be highly effective against the microbes in question.”

It sounded like quite a convenient item, but according to Fleiss-san, its power was not absolute. The card’s effects were limited, so if the microbes spread throughout the world, the purification would not be able to deal with them simply due to the great number of them.

At any rate, it sounded as if Kamijou could leave the issue of the microbes to Fleiss-san.

What Kamijou was most worried about was Index.

“But…” Kamijou said with the binoculars still in hand. “There are fewer people than I expected. …In fact, it’s just that whip girl. I thought she’d be surrounded by guards or something.”

“The guards Bisai took with her may have all been taken out by my magic back there. She can’t drive on her own and she can’t exactly call a taxi while taking a hostage with her. I suspect she is waiting for reinforcements from her lab or base or whatever.”

“So she’s all alone right now? Then this is our chance to rescue Index.”

“Seems that way.” Fleiss-san removed the binoculars from her face and narrowed her eyes. “Now, let’s get close and kick her ass two to one.”

“…I’d rather you didn’t say it like that.”

“We just have to win, right? If we take her out with our first attack, we win. Some might say that’s cowardly, but that won’t stop me. I think I’ll take that damn whip from her and give her some red lines all over that white skin of hers.”

“Please, stop saying things like that!! I’m feeling guilty enough just at the thought of raising my fist against a girl!!” shouted back Kamijou in rebuttal, but Fleiss-san was not listening.

And then their strategy began.

♦

“…So you’ve come,” said Bisai Otome quietly when she saw Kamijou enter the factory grounds.

As it was an unmanned facility, it lacked even the level of lighting that would normally be considered the bare minimum. However, perhaps to save energy when lights were needed, its lights came on based on motion sensors. Lights flicked on and off in areas other than where Kamijou stood, but that was likely due to stray cats or crows.

Bisai must have had control of the security because there was no light above her.

She merely raised her head upon seeing Kamijou casually stepping into the light.

“I thought she might end up being nothing more than an unneeded burden, but it seems I was right to use her as a hostage.”

“You’re wrong,” spat back Kamijou. “To be honest, if you hadn’t captured Index, I wouldn’t have gotten this involved.”

“I see. Too bad.”

As she spoke, Bisai undid the latch on the long, narrow case and pulled out the whip made of black leather. The girl tossed the no longer necessary case to the ground and Kamijou spoke to her.

“Where is Index?”

“?”

Bisai’s expression froze for a second at Kamijou’s question.

“What do you mean? She’s right over th-…”

She started to point over toward a nearby location with her chin, but then her whole body froze.

She was gone.

Index had been restrained with her hands in handcuffs, but now she was gone.

(Did she run away on her own? No…!?)

In that instant, Bisai's attention was drawn elsewhere.

And Kamijou did not overlook that opening. He intently stepped forward.

♦

In truth, Fleiss-san had taken action.

She and Kamijou had used the binoculars to get a general idea of the location of Bisai Otome and Index within the factory grounds. They most feared having the hostage used as a shield to buy time. In other words, their top priority was not to defeat Bisai; it was to rescue Index.

As such, Kamijou had purposefully headed out below the lights to draw Bisai's attention while Fleiss-san had circled around in the darkness and stealthily approached. The general plan had been for her to recover Index and get away.

Their plan had succeeded.

Fleiss-san had escaped to the back of the facility with Index in tow.

Once they had the hostage, it was two to one.

Bisai's whip was still a threat, but it still improved their odds.

Or it should have.

"H-huh? Why can't I get the handcuffs off? Hmm, maybe I should use the power of Tejas to burn the chains off…"

"I-if you do that, you'll blow away my wrists!!"

"Then what am I supposed to do? I want to deal with this as quickly as possible and get back to help…"

Just as Fleiss-san said that, she heard an odd noise.

Her eyes narrowed in puzzlement just as two even thinner C-shaped pieces of metal came out of Index's handcuffs. They circled around Fleiss-san's wrists as she tried to get the handcuffs off and then they locked into place with a metallic click.

"Wha-? Eh? Wait a second…!!"

She frantically tried to pull her wrists from the metal, but they were firmly held in place. And as a final blow, a tiny speaker within the handcuffs started playing the following message.

“The unlawful release prevention program has activated. Any vibration, impact, electrical shock, or heat over a certain level is seen as an unlawful method. Upon detection of such a method, various methods of restraint such as tear gas will be used.”

“…”

“…”

Index and Fleiss-san fell silent upon being faced with the unexpected threat of the smart handcuffs.

Hearing the cracks of a whip and explosions starting a slight distance away, Fleiss-san muttered a few words.

“…What do I do?”

♦

A few coffee can-like metal cylinders were thrown and the stun grenades blew up. The eye-burning flashes of light and earsplitting din filled the factory.

“!!”

Bisai’s extended range whip mercilessly attacked from beyond Kamijou’s destroyed senses before he even felt the dizziness that made it feel as if he had been punched in the head.

The high-pitched crack of the whip seemed to “awaken” his supposedly destroyed sense of hearing and a tremendous shock ran across his cheek. Kamijou somehow managed to avoid collapsing to the ground, but Bisai sent the whip flying a second and third time. He felt pain wrap around his right calf and then felt himself being pulled forward.

“Gah!?”

The invisible strike made Kamijou lose his footing and he fell face up onto the ground.

(Dammit. What is Fleiss-san doing…!?)

Kamijou immediately went on guard for the whip, but the next strike did not come. Instead, something fell to his feet.

It was a stun grenade.

"...!!"

He immediately rolled to the side to get away, but that was all he could do. The stun grenade detonated right next to him and his already on-and-off senses received a further blow. It was not just pure brightness. He felt a dull pain eat into the outside of his eyes like when one looked directly at the sun.

He writhed about on the ground and heard Bisai's voice.

"...If you've recovered your hostage, then is there really any reason for you to stick around...?"

In reality, she may have said more than that. However, the stun grenade had left Kamijou's ears in a state where that was all he heard.

That was why Kamijou replied based on a guess as to what she was talking about.

"If you're willing to just give her back, that's great, but you don't intend to do that, do you?" Kamijou spat back as his mind raced.

Bisai's whip.

Of course, a whip that could apply actual damage to someone outside its normal range could not be a proper weapon. It either had some kind of gimmick or Bisai herself was using some kind of psychic power. Either way, Kamijou had no way of winning unless he could figure out what it was.

(What could it be...?)

Kamijou clenched his fist anew and focused on the dully glowing leather whip and Bisai's wrist as she held it.

(What is it that bothers me about it? This isn't just some "convenient esper power". Surely I can narrow it down a little further than that...)

As Kamijou thought, a water droplet dripped down his cheek.

He wiped it off with the back of his hand and then frowned.

It felt oddly sticky and rough.

(Sweat...? No, this is...!?)

That was when Bisai made her next move.

She tossed a stun grenade with its pin removed and bent her black whip.

♦

The stun grenade tossed at Kamijou's feet quickly exploded.

However, Kamijou had removed his school uniform jacket and covered the stun grenade with it. The pure white light and explosive noise made the thick cloth seem transparent, but it was not perfect. Its effects were greatly lessened and Kamijou's senses were not destroyed.

But something even more mysterious happened.

Bisai swung her whip when the stun grenade detonated and it flew through the air toward him, but no wounds appeared on Kamijou's body. The whip had not hit him.

"The stun grenades are just deceptions," said Kamijou as Bisai gritted her teeth in surprise. "Their true purpose was to scatter tiny particles that transmit impacts easily. That's how you extended the range of your whip. But that also means I can bring its range back to normal by preventing you from scattering them."

The "impacts" transmitted included sound.

With his senses in a normal state, he would likely have noticed something odd about the sound, but the stun grenade also took care of that. With his senses messed up already, he would not notice anything was amiss.

"Kh…!!"

The girl swung the whip even harder with a twist of her hips. Her blazer made a flapping noise, but the crack of the whip drowned it out.

But Kamijou brought up his right hand and the cracking noise was diverted to the side.

"I see. So you blew the particles floating in the area toward me with the movements of your blazer. You turned your body into a giant fan." Kamijou paused for a second. "That special particle grenade was not enough to pull this off. Merely filling the area with particles that easily transmit impacts would just transmit everything evenly around. That's why you needed one more gimmick. You needed your own esper power that could set the directionality of the transmission to a certain extent."

"What…but…" Bisai frowned. "How did you just negate my power? I understand covering the grenade with your jacket, but how did you get rid of my power…?"

"It may be unfair, but that's the power I have."

Kamijou wiped a trail of blood from his lips and held his right fist out toward the girl.

“This just became a whole lot easier if you’re using some kind of supernatural power. My right hand can destroy that kind of power whether it’s magic or psychic in nature.”

As he spoke, Kamijou picked his jacket back up from the ground. He clenched his right hand into a fist and held the jacket in his left hand. It made him look like a matador.

“…*Do you really understand*?” Bisai asked, holding her whip out reflexively. “You seem to think you have sealed off my attacks with that, but you technically haven’t. All you’ve done is-…”

“Oh, I know. I haven’t sealed off your attacks. By removing the power that was giving directionality to the impacts, I’ve made it so that the power that you had some control of before will now be scattered about again. You could say I’ve made it into a ricocheting bullet that’s path no one can predict. Your attack is now like firing a shotgun in an enclosed area.”

Kamijou’s tone was light.

He was already prepared.

“If you fall back now, this can end with no one getting hurt.”

“…”

Bisai fell silent.

However, she then clenched the whip’s grip even tighter than before.

“I can’t do that.”

“Why not?”

“…Because I want to save them.”

That was all she said.

That must have been that girl’s reason. Now that she had reconfirmed her core motivation, a powerful light returned to Bisai’s eyes. Before Kamijou could prepare himself, she gathered up even more strength than before and swung the whip.

The impact scattered about.

“!!”

The sound spread out in a strange distorted way. The air shook. However, Kamijou ignored it and ran forward. He clenched his fist tightly and stared forward.

The sound of the air ripping passed right by his ear.

When that was not enough to make him falter, Bisai stepped back a bit. She then swung the whip again in an attempt to stop Kamijou's advance and get back into her rhythm.

Kamijou's cheek split as he ran.

The tremendous crack of the whip exploded out.

Kamijou's head shook and his vision blurred, but his focus did not waver.

He took another step.

As the boy stepped forward, the girl with the whip entered the range of his fist.

Kamijou clenched his fist even tighter.

He poured all his strength into it.

"Ooooooohhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!!"

As Kamijou yelled, he swung his fist.

However, the impact from Bisai's whip struck his arm and altered its trajectory. It had not been intentional. Like the whip was an exploding handgun, Bisai's own finger had been struck as well.

"...Gh!!"

Kamijou heard a small cry of pain. Bisai's fingernail had been split. It must have been quite painful because her movements dulled slightly. However, that was Bisai's only weapon. If she let up, it was clear Kamijou's fist would find its mark. That was why she tightened her grip on the whip despite knowing it was a crapshoot.

The crack of the whip sounded out yet again. Fresh blood flew through the air. Drops of blood from both of them collided and fell to the ground. Even so, the stalemate did not last long. Kamijou stepped even further forward and clenched his fist tight.

And then...

Kamijou's fist and Bisai's whip.

The two attacks forcefully crossed.

The crack of the whip echoed throughout the nighttime factory.

Bisai's whip had directly struck Kamijou's cheek. The particles in the air no longer mattered. The whip had been swung at close range and the tip had taken its full force and directly struck Kamijou in the face. His skin split like a stocking and red blood dripped down.

However, that was not enough to remove the light from Kamijou's eyes.

"If you insist on carrying out your objective even if it brings misfortune to others…"

Kamijou Touma's right fist ignored it all and slammed into Bisai's face.

Time stopped for Bisai.

Her strength left her and she collapsed to the ground as Kamijou continued to speak.

"…then I'll destroy that illusion of yours."

♦

"Hmm," said Fleiss-san. "So basically, you took all the best parts for yourself. Really, you should have left some for me. I wanted to knock that girl down from her high horse…Sigh."

"Don't say it like that!! That was quite difficult for Kamijou-san, believe me!! In fact, look! I was almost killed! Look all these wounds from that whip!!"

"Really, I just wanted to deliver at least one clever line." Fleiss-san had a bitter smile on her face. "But look at us! No matter what I said it would have seemed pathetic, so I kind of lost all motivation."

"Speaking of that, what are you two doing?" Kamijou asked.

Index had her hands restrained behind her back and Fleiss-san had her hands caught in additional thin C-shaped pieces of metal coming from the handcuffs. With a total of four hands caught in the handcuffs, it did look ridiculous.

Index was sitting flat on the ground and pouting.

"Well, that's just how traps are. When you see them up close, they seem stupid, but they're a serious matter when they catch you," the nun commented.

“Oh, is that so?”

“By the way, winner boy. Did that sadistic girl have the key to the handcuffs on her by any chance?”

“Hm? Oh, this is probably it.”

Kamijou pulled a small key out of his pocket. Index and Fleiss-san looked relieved when they saw it. Their position must have been rather uncomfortable to maintain.

“Anyway, after you get these off of us, let’s go attack the microbe research facility. There may be some remaining forces at their base, but their line of command will be in chaos with that sadistic girl gone. This is our chance.”

“Oh, do you know where her lab is?”

“What have you been looking at this whole time?”

“?”

Kamijou looked puzzled and Fleiss-san lightly shook the handcuffs.

“At any rate, just get this thing off.”

“Okay, okay. But you really are an idiot. Even if they are Academy City smart handcuffs, they’re still nothing more than an extreme version of a jack-in-the-box. If you’re stupid enough to get caught by these, you-…”

Kamijou trailed off because he had heard a noise.

With a metallic noise, C-shaped pieces of metal came out and trapped Kamijou’s wrists as he tried to remove the handcuffs.

“…”

“…”

“…”

The three idiots were now restrained by a single pair of handcuffs.

They all remained silent for a bit, but…

“Gwoooahhh!! W-wait, Index! Don’t try to bite me with your hands behind your back like that! I’m completely defenseless in this position!! You’re going to hurt my back!!”

“Yeah, but this scene can’t end without a punch line!!”

“And Fleiss-san! Don’t lose your temper!! Don’t put that strange card in your mouth and try to cause some supernatural phenomenon!! Don’t worry! I’ll take care of this!! Kamijou-san will twist his arm around like in a human knot and get this key in the keyhole!!”

“Fghhmgh,” said Fleiss-san in an unintelligible comment due to the card in her mouth. It seemed there would be a few more troubles before the incident came to a close.

♦

Bisai Otome lay sprawled out on the ground unmoving for a while.

Finally, she stirred within the empty factory. Before she tried to stand up, she pulled out a small radio from her blazer pocket.

She set the frequency while still on the ground.

This frequency was not one used by Anti-Skill.

She was intercepting a signal form much further away.

“…I was defeated. Most likely, the artificial microbes created on Earth for inspection purposes will be destroyed by some means or another. It seemed they knew the location of the cultivation facility.”

That location had been the observatory.

It had been that astronomical research facility in the mountainous District 21. It could not have been a coincidence that the analog magic user had been there. She had likely been searching for the location of Mars World, the small dome used to accelerate the evolution of the microbes.

“…Is that so… However…we did not wish for…the chaotic spread and propagation…of our own kind. …In a way…this resolution…could be seen as being…for the best.”

“How can you say that?” spat out Bisai while still collapsed on the ground. “I created a special storage facility to prevent that from happening. The whole point is to shelter you on Earth. That was why I needed to create microbes like you to run tests on beforehand.”

A throbbing pain ran through her.

Bisai sighed.

“By the way, why do you think our conversation was leaked to the general public? You were sending the signal directly to my lab, so I find it hard to believe any other antenna could have picked it up.”

After thinking for a bit, Bisai’s eyebrows moved slightly.

The signal from Mars had started causing a commotion in Academy City a few days before, but Bisai Otome and the Martian microbes had first come into contact months before.

“It bothers me that that damn analog magic user had information about you. That’s science side information. I highly doubt it, but *it wasn’t you, was it*?”

“We…do not know who did this. …Most likely, it was…a different colony from us. We are not the only…microbes that arrived on Mars…via the probes. Colonies of microbes…that act as a whole…and have differences in intelligence and level…of advancement…are in a state similar to…what you call war. …After all, the water and oxygen…we require to survive…is limited.”

“…”

War.

The conflict they spoke of was much simpler than what humans dealt in. They would take their enemy or opponent into their own body, digest them, and receive their nutrients. That was all there was to their extremely primitive war.

“Basically…it is a difference in…approach. …We asked for help…from the science side…of your planet. In other words…you. …However…there must have been a colony…that asked for help from…someone else…”

“I see. So we’re not the only ones thinking along the same lines.”

“…How are things…on your end…?”

“At the soonest, the next time I can get something into space would be the beginning of October. …Do you understand the Earth-based calendar?”

“It is…a measurement of time based on…the rotation and revolution of…your planet… It is a bit…out of sync from…how things seem here on Mars…but the devices inside the probe…count time using the Earth-based system.”

“Currently, Academy City is beginning to construct its fourth satellite. I intend to have the necessary equipment launched into space along with it.”

Bisai fell into thought for a short period before speaking again.

“I was thinking of saying something to ease your mind, but I guess there is really no point.”

“Yes. We know…that the odds…are low.”

“Basically, the probes to Mars were only meant to get there. Having one return to Earth is unprecedented. I will have multiple units combine together in space, creating an entire shuttle with a booster which will land on Mars. If it goes well, the large booster will ignite once it retrieves you and hopefully that will take you away from Mars’s gravitational field.”

“…If the shuttle is…tilted even slightly when it…lands, it could…burn up in Mars’s atmosphere. And if it does…manage to land on Mars, its…route back to Earth…cannot have even the slightest…mistake. It also…could fail its entry into…Earth’s atmosphere. …We are aware that there are…countless potential problems.”

The voice from the radio fell silent there.

After a pause, it started speaking again.

“But we… do not have anyone else we can rely on…”

“…”

Most likely, the plan would fail.

Bisai thought that because she knew what level humanity’s technology was at. Merely creating a small probe that would land on Mars was a major project, so creating a probe that would return to Earth again was just too unprecedented.

It only had to retrieve microbes rather than carry humans, so it could be much smaller than a normal rocket. After its multiple stages of boosters detached, it would only be about the size of two or three plastic bottles. However, even succeeding in that was worth any number of Nobel prizes.

She could not even calculate what the odds were and yet the situation required her to succeed on the first try.

After thinking through all that, Bisai Otome smiled.

“Well, it’s also possible I’m being tricked.”

“?”

“In this age, it isn’t just nations that can launch satellites. Civilian companies have developed satellites that are quite small and Academy City has put together an experimental satellite that is only 7 millimeters long. That was only put together in a lab though and isn’t the fourth one I mentioned.” Bisai stared up into the night sky. “Someone could have calculated the orbital paths of Earth and Mars and placed a small satellite between them. By sending and receiving signals from it, they could make it look like the signals were being sent from Mars.”

Whoever or whatever was on the other end simply listened.

“I tried to create microbes similar to you in my Mars World experiment, but I failed. However, that may have been the right answer. It’s possible that the microbes I used as samples would not undergo the sudden changes everyone is imagining they would.”

“…”

“As such, I need to keep in mind that this could all be a lie made using some civilian satellite. UFO photos are often faked and it wouldn’t surprise me if there was some person out there who has the resources to do something like this for fun.”

“…You will…learn whether that is true or not…soon enough,” came the calm response from the radio. “If you…come here…you will know…”

Hearing that, Bisai sighed lightly.

Still sprawled out on the ground, she muttered a few words.

“…Mars really is a long way away.”

とある魔術の禁書目録(インデックス)SP
初春飾利

UIHARU KAZARI

Uiharu Kazari was a first-year middle school girl who was part of Judgment, a group that protected the peace of Academy City (although they primarily dealt with issues within the schools). Normally, she wore a short-sleeved sailor uniform and had artificial flowers covering her head, but this day was a rare exception.

"Uuu... Is this kind of ability really needed for periodic Judgment training...?" muttered Uiharu dejectedly.

She was wearing what could perhaps be called a jumpsuit; the upper clothing and the pants were completely combined into one piece of clothing, and a zipper ran all the way from her neck down to her waist. It made her look something like an F1 racing driver. Since it was colored a bright orange, it also made her look like a member of a foreign rescue team.

This outfit gave her long sleeves and long pants despite the broiling hot weather of midsummer.

It's hot, it stinks, and it's stuffy!! Eee!! This is the worst!!

She was also wearing something similar to a backpack.

However, it had an excessive number of belts holding it on. It had the basic two over the shoulders, but belts made of synthetic fiber also stretched over the chest, stomach, and around the legs at the thighs.

It was a parachute.

If she pulled the string near her waist, it would open up like a giant umbrella, but it was currently contained within that bag.

Wait, how am I supposed to get this thing off...? Huh? This... no, this switch isn't enough...?

The reason Uiharu was struggling with it was simple.

She spoke this reason aloud with a puzzled look on her face.

"Why was the free fall training suddenly cancelled?"

♦

It was 6:10 PM on August 1.

A single large vehicle travelled along a main road in the evening with several guard vehicles surrounding it.

It resembled the kind of towing vehicle used to transport bullet train cars.

Those extremely large carriers were used to take the bullet train from the factory which it was created in to the track. Their large engines were similar to those of armored cars or snowplows, and they were over thirty meters long including the back portion holding the bullet train car. The bullet train would be surrounded by a metal framework similar to those that make up buildings. Bolts and wires running horizontally and vertically held it all in place.

However, this vehicle was not towing a bullet train.

It was towing a satellite.

The giant vehicle was called the satellite guidance vehicle.

Surrounded by guard vehicles, it was taking the satellite from a lab in District 10 where it had been filled with fuel, through Districts 7 and 18, and finally to a rocket launch pad in District 23.

Or so it should have.

"Wait… What are you doing…?"

The change was first noticed around the time they passed from District 10 to District 7. The person who noticed it was the driver of the accompanying guard vehicle driving in front of the giant satellite guidance vehicle. He first saw it in the rearview mirror and then actually turned his head around to look.

The giant guidance vehicle that held the satellite was approaching from behind him.

It was destroying the proper balance of the convoy.

Or rather…

"Foot Soldier to General. You're getting too close. Decelerate and keep your proper distance. I repeat, Foot Soldier to General… W-wahh!?"

The giant satellite guidance vehicle rapidly approached as if to collide with him, so the driver of the front guard vehicle frantically turned the wheel to the side at the last second. Due to the change of course, the giant vehicle with the satellite scraped across the guard vehicle's back lights and continued on ahead.

"You idiot!! The front guard doesn't give up his position no matter what. I don't know what's going on, but stop it even if you have to run it off the road!!" rebuked his colleague over the radio.

"I'd like to see you try that," replied the driver as he wiped a cold sweat from his forehead.

Running the large vehicle off the road would have been doable. In fact, the driver was confident in his ability to do so even against such a large vehicle.

However…

"Do you know what kind of fuel is inside that satellite!? It has 1500 kilograms of hydrazine in it!! That stuff is toxic! Do you have any idea what would happen if it leaked out into the city!?"

As the two drivers yelled back and forth over the radio, the satellite guidance vehicle continued to accelerate. It shot ahead, plowing out of the way the guard vehicles meant to protect it, and then pulled away from the convoy.

They all noticed the abnormality, and they all understood the danger.

However, none of them did anything.

As they watched it, the large vehicle carrying the satellite had become a large weapon in and of itself.

♦

The 73rd branch office of Anti-Skill in District 7 was as busy as a beehive.

Anti-Skill also protected the peace of Academy City, but it was a different organization from Judgment. While Judgment was made up of students, Anti-Skill was made up of trained teachers.

Uiharu Kazari arrived inside that area that looked like a police station. They had gone beyond their own organization and called her in due to the emergency situation.

A female Anti-Skill member who just so happened to be near the entrance looked at Uiharu with a puzzled expression.

"...What's with that look?"

"Oh, umm... sorry. I was suddenly called here while in the middle of my periodic training..." responded Uiharu as she shrunk down in her orange jumpsuit and parachute.

Hearing that, the woman frowned even further.

"What kind of training uses a whole bunch of flowers...?"

"Eh? That!? The flowers on my head are stranger than the parachute!?"

Uiharu's outburst drew the attention of a few more of the adults around her. She shrank down even further and snuck off further into the office.

The woman who had spoken to her before looked down at the student ID Uiharu held out.

"So you're Uiharu Kazari from Judgment's 177th branch office. We were hoping for Shirai Kuroko, the teleportation esper."

"S-sorry. I couldn't get a hold of her."

"If we had her, we would have a lot more options for how to deal with this... I guess I'll go search through the Bank for any other Judgment members who might be of some use. Anyway, they're having a meeting over there. You can get a grasp on the situation there."

Hearing that, Uiharu obediently headed on into the office.

Even if it was the investigation headquarters, they must not have had much time to spend on appearances. They were not using some grand meeting room. Instead, the strategy meeting was taking place in a corner of the office around a whiteboard with seats gathered around it.

"The special vehicle with the satellite aboard is currently out of control. It has strayed from its scheduled route and is currently heading north on line #49," said a man, his voice filling the office. "Technically, it is not a satellite in and of itself. It is only a module for Hikoboshi II to allow it to carry out additional experiments. However, it can separate and navigate on its own, so it is essentially the same as a satellite. It is only not classified as one to make things easier as far as international treaties are concerned."

The bespectacled teacher would normally be teaching classes, but now he was explaining the gist of the incident. One of the other Anti-Skill members raised his hand and asked a question like a student taking a class.

"Can we contact the driver?"

"There is no issue with the vehicle's radio, but what she has told us is the real issue." The bespectacled Anti-Skill member gave a sigh. "It seems a message appeared on the internet-connected GPS system in the vehicle. It said the car would be crashed using the remote control system if she did not follow the path displayed by the GPS system. Thanks to this, the driver can do nothing but keep the cursor showing the vehicle's location from exiting a moving red circle on the screen. She has no idea where she is going."

"...So it's a carjacking by an unknown criminal. This really is a convenient age we live in."

Uiharu had taken a seat in an arbitrary empty seat in the office, and she now asked a question.

"What did the message mean about crashing the vehicle using the remote control system?"

"Judgment, hm?"

The bespectacled Anti-Skill member who had given the explanation looked at Uiharu and her outfit with a puzzled look, but they had been the one to request help from Judgment in the first place. The man seemed to think she was butting into their turf, but he still answered her question.

"That vehicle has an automatic evasion system in case of emergencies. If the driver were to lose consciousness due to a heart attack or brain hemorrhage, the system can safely stop the vehicle on the side of the road. It seems that has been taken advantage of," he explained. "This evasion system can take control of the vehicle for only 100 seconds. However, that is more than enough time to cause some kind of accident. After all, it has complete control of the gas pedal and steering wheel."

"But this has never been tested before. It might just be an empty threat."

"We can't take that risk," said the man slightly angrily in response to the casual comment. "That satellite has 1500 kilograms of a toxic fuel known as hydrazine. If the vehicle does crash, the satellite could be destroyed and the fuel could catch fire. If that happens, that toxic substance will be sent into the air, contaminating everything within a one-kilometer radius. And the seasonal winds could spread the effects even further. If you breathe it in, everything from your throat to your lungs will become inflamed. This is not a situation where we can rely on 'mights'. The driver made the correct decision."

The suit-wearing adults either sighed or clicked their tongues.

Of course, this was not directed at their colleague who had asked a strange question. It was due to their dislike of the situation.

"The criminal hacked into the GPS system to display this message and to continually display this red circle on the screen in real time. This is clearly more than just a prank. …We should assume the criminal can actually carry out their threat if it comes to it."

Uiharu's breath caught in her throat at how bad the situation was.

"…Where is the criminal sending the vehicle?" she asked.

"That's what we need to find out. We would like some help from your information analysis abilities."

♦

A special vehicle over thirty meters long and with a satellite loaded onboard roared down line #49 in District 7. It came dangerously close to running into the cars trying to head along normally, and students crossing the crosswalks had to scatter out of the way. When it plowed through red lights, it stirred up a storm of horns. Luckily, the satellite guidance vehicle was swerving in an attempt to avoid the normal cars and people, causing its back to wave back and forth.

A single sports car accelerated in order to follow the satellite guidance vehicle.

A woman wearing a green track suit and a muscular man were inside.

Their names were Yomikawa Aiho and Saigou Ryouta, respectively.

They, too, were members of Anti-Skill.

"There it is. The number matches. That has to be the one known as the General."

"B-but should we really be doing this, Yomikawa-san? The branch chief ordered everyone to attend the meeting…"

"We can do our job without attending. There's no point in us being there. I'm sure all they're gonna end up doing is get into an argument over whether they should set up a barricade or not," responded Yomikawa in a light tone. "Taking care of this is more important."

Saigou sighed and pressed the accelerator further down.

He drove up next to the satellite guidance vehicle as if he were going to pass it, matched its speed, and then approached it as if he were going to ram it sideways.

A woman in her late thirties sat in the driver's seat that was surrounded by thick sheets of metal, and she looked over at them in shock.

Yomikawa set the frequency on the radio and used the signal to speak to the woman.

"Um, hi. Is this Sangaku Youko-san, the driver?"

"!? ...Who are you...?"

"I am Yomikawa from Anti-Skill. My colleague Saigou is here with me. We've come here to deal with this situation, so it would be a huge help if you would just do what we tell you to."

It seemed Sangaku said something, but it did not come out as words. Yomikawa gave a gentle smile through the window and spoke into the radio once more.

"First of all, I'm going to join you over there. Is that okay?"

"Join me? ...!!"

The driver's questioning tone suddenly changed to surprise.

This was because Yomikawa had opened the window of the sports car and leaned out.

Even Saigou, a true Anti-Skill member, opened his eyes wide in shock when he saw that.

Neither the satellite guidance vehicle nor the sports car was obeying the speed limit. The satellite guidance vehicle was currently flying through the city at 120 kph in order to remain within the red circle.

"W-wait! Yomikawa-san!?"

"Quiet. A professional can't get so worried, especially in front of the person we're supposed to be protecting."

Only Yomikawa herself remained calm as she stretched her arm out while sticking out the window. The rucksack on her back must have held various types of tools because they could be heard clanking around when the wind shook her body.

Just as Yomikawa's fingertips were about to reach the driver's side door of the other vehicle...

The evening sunlight reflected off the glass on the side of a building suddenly shined directly in Saigou's eyes as he drove the sports car. With his vision suddenly impaired, Saigou hit the brakes without thinking. This greatly shook Yomikawa's body as she hung out the window, and the next thing she knew, the sports car had fallen back alongside the satellite portion of the special vehicle.

Yomikawa did not try to climb onto the satellite guidance vehicle. Instead, she reflexively grabbed the metal framework surrounding the satellite in order to maintain her balance.

"You idiot!! Are you trying to get me killed!?" Yomikawa shouted, but she received no response from Saigou.

With no advance warning, the satellite guidance vehicle suddenly swerved, causing the metal framework on its back to slam into the sports car.

The strike from the thirty-meter vehicle was like a dragon swiping at a human with its tail.

It seemed Saigou tried to avoid it, but he did not make it in time. With a great crash, the sports car was knocked away. Its brakes screeched, but he never regained control of the sports car. It ended up crashing into a nearby wind turbine.

It seemed unlikely that Sangaku Youko, the driver, would have done that.

Someone had abused the emergency automatic evasion system.

"Saigou!! Shit!!" shouted Yomikawa as she was left dangling down from the metal framework used to keep the satellite in place.

She realized he could not hear her, and pulled out her radio.

"Y-Yomikawa-san. I'm… fine. I'm sorry. It looks like the engine is too damaged…"

"That doesn't matter. Instead, contact the rest of Anti-Skill and guide the people and other vehicles. At this rate, the damage really will spread!!"

Yomikawa somehow managed to get one foot on the bed of the vehicle that the satellite was resting on, which restored her balance.

God dammit. If the driver doesn't keep following the instructions on the GPS, the criminal will crash this thing. And that sudden deceleration saved my life. Just joining the driver probably won't help change anything…

She gritted her teeth, but there was no fear on her face.

In that case, I just have to stop this thing more forcibly.

Blowing the tires would have been the quickest method, but that could easily lead to the vehicle crashing.

Another method was…

I know! The exhaust.

No matter how complex or elaborate it was, an engine was still a device that used fire. It used oxygen and emitted carbon monoxide. If she could cut off that flow, the fire that moved the engine would go out.

Yomikawa looked at the back of the driver's compartment.

Unlike a normal car, the satellite guidance vehicle would have a smokestack-like exhaust pipe there.

But…

"It's not there… There's no exhaust!?"

The exhaust that should have been there was missing. She looked around while holding onto the metal framework, but she could not find it anywhere else either.

"Dammit. Don't tell me something this big is electric!!"

(If only it were a hydrogen engine or a kind of electric car that had an exhaust…)

At any rate, she could not use that method.

That was when Yomikawa received a transmission over her radio.

She assumed it was from Saigou, but it was not.

"Ksshh…This is Uiharu Kazari from Judgment's 177th Branch Office."

"Judgment… Damn that branch chief. Now he's gotten the children wrapped up in this…"

"What?"

"Nothing. This is Yomikawa Aiho from Branch Office 73. I'm currently hanging down from the metal framework holding the satellite onto the back of the General vehicle. Is there anything I can do?"

At first, Uiharu was shocked that Yomikawa had climbed directly onto the vehicle, but she quickly realized it was no time to just sit in shock. She must not have been used to genuine incidents because Yomikawa could hear the sound of paper documents being shuffled around.

“W-well…First, move to the driver’s compartment.”

“The driver’s compartment? I doubt this problem can be solved just by slamming on the brakes.”

“Um…If you could follow my directions, I would like for you to send me the data from the GPS system in real time.”

“Understood,” Yomikawa replied lightly before beginning to casually move across the vehicle that was travelling at 120 kph.

She climbed up a part of the framework running diagonally, planted her feet on the side of the cylindrical satellite, and moved along like a monkey.

When Yomikawa arrived on the thick roof of the driver’s compartment, she leaned down as if peering into a well and stuck her head in the passenger side window.

This surprised the driver, Sangaku Youko.

“Wah wah!?”

“Oh, don’t be frightened!! Don’t move the wheel!! I’m Yomikawa. Nice to meet you!!”

After that incredibly halfhearted greeting, Yomikawa climbed in through the window.

The GPS system was displaying a red circle just as reported. Sangaku was driving in order to keep the cursor indicating the vehicle’s position from leaving that constantly moving circle. Besides the red circle, there was also a triangle indicator that gave a general direction to drive in, but it was not enough to figure out what the final destination was.

The red circle moved about within the screen as it wished. This made following it quite difficult for Sangaku.

“Shortly after the original message arrived on the GPS, the steering wheel stopped working for 5 seconds.”

“So the criminal gave you a threat,” said Yomikawa bitterly.

Given how Saigou's car had been repelled with such good timing, the criminal must have been watching the satellite guidance vehicle somehow. Yomikawa had been able to get aboard despite that because…

(I guess either he is afraid of causing an accident before reaching the destination if he gives too many "threats" or he doesn't view me as a real problem.)

The unconcerned automatic voice of the GPS's instructions seemed somehow unnerving.

Yomikawa clicked her tongue, looked away from the GPS screen, and spoke into her radio.

"I've made it to the passenger seat. So what do I need to do?"

"According to the spec sheet, there should be a Standard-C communications cable in the dashboard. Use that to connect the GPS system to your cell phone. The system is a model that connects to the internet, so the internal modem should also function as an external modem."

Yomikawa did as she was instructed and her cell phone started transmitting a large amount of data.

"This way, the instructions the criminal is sending in real time will also be sent to me. If I analyze the data, I may be able to figure out where he is leading you."

"Is there no way to solve this situation a little more directly? Finding the criminal is important, but stopping this vehicle takes precedence right now."

"True…" Uiharu said while looking through various documents. "The criminal is abusing the emergency automatic evasion system. The system is meant to have a program safely stop the vehicle in case the driver suddenly loses consciousness."

"And?"

"The system can only interfere when a moving vehicle needs to be stopped. It cannot cause a vehicle to start again if it is already stopped. If the electric motor running the vehicle is completely stopped, the criminal will no longer be able to do anything."

The simplest method would be to slam on the brakes.

However, the giant vehicle was 30 meters long and weighed over 10 tons. It could not be stopped instantaneously. The instant they left the red circle displayed on the GPS system, the criminal would take over and cause it to crash.

Sangaku Youko, the driver, gritted her teeth.

She looked over at the vehicle's key located near the steering wheel.

"Just turning the ignition key would be simple enough, but it's locked in place when the vehicle is in motion. It's impossible to stop the engine without stopping first."

"Hmm…" Uiharu thought for a bit. "Then we just have to do something about that lock. The vehicle should have a box with the electrical related things collected inside it. If we mess with it, we should be able to turn the key and shut off the motor."

"Where is this box!?" asked Yomikawa.

"…Below," responded Uiharu awkwardly.

"Hah?"

"I'm sorry, but…it's located directly below the driver's compartment, just above the road."

♦

Uiharu faced her notebook computer within the 73rd Anti-Skill Branch Office. The adults surrounding her were overwhelming her. She had originally been called in to help with odd jobs in order to increase efficiency, but she dealt with things so quickly that it became difficult for others to cut in. She had almost complete control of the situation.

Suddenly, Uiharu looked up from the computer.

She had heard voices coming from the entrance to the office. One came from a girl about the same age as herself and another from a boy who seemed younger. At first, she thought they were reinforcements from Judgment, but they were acting oddly. Some kind of dispute had broken out and the children forced their way forward.

"…Those are children of the driver, Sangaku-san," said the bespectacled Anti-Skill member so those around could not hear. "They are students in Academy City. I understand that they are worried about their mother, but we can't have them in the investigation headquarters. It may be a bit cruel, but they need to be taken away from here."

Uiharu bit her lip upon hearing that.

She had been speaking to Sangaku Youko through the radio, but that casual conversation would be quite precious indeed to the family members. And yet they were not being permitted to use it.

The voices at the entrance to the office gradually grew quieter and quieter.

Even so, Uiharu still clearly heard someone say "Save my mom."

"..."

The bespectacled Anti-Skill member averted his gaze slightly.

Most likely, the Anti-Skill members who had dealt with the children had not made any promises either. Anti-Skill and all other modern organizations and companies would not make promises they were not sure they could keep. It was a means to prevent lawsuits.

Uiharu was a member of Judgment.

She had been taught how to deal with such situations during her training.

But...

"...I will save her," Uiharu said quietly. "No matter what, I will make sure no one is lost including Sangaku-san."

(I will write a formal explanation of my actions if necessary.)

If she could remain silent after hearing a child say something like that, she felt she should just quit Judgment.

♦

While sitting in the passenger seat of the satellite guidance vehicle, Yomikawa removed the shoulder straps of her rucksack and placed it on her lap. She opened it, pulled out a silver tool, and then shoved the rucksack into the space meant for her legs.

"Okay, here I go."

Yomikawa opened the passenger door of the satellite guidance vehicle, leaned out, and peered into the narrow space between the bottom of the vehicle and the road. The vehicle's giant front wheel rotated next to her ear and the asphalt flew by like a chainsaw only a few centimeters below the top of her upside down head.

"There it is. I see a silver box 40 centimeters across and 10 centimeters thick."

"That is the electronics control box. It should be held closed by screws on the four corners. Can you get them off?"

"Sure thing," muttered Yomikawa as she focused on the tool in her hand.

She was holding a device that looked like a pen nib with a motor attached. It was similar to the device used by a dentist to scrape at patient's teeth. It was a micro cutter. The device was like a malicious version of an electric eraser which scraped away steel rather than the writing from a notebook.

Instead of unscrewing the screws, she scraped away the entire top of the screws.

With a horrible grinding noise, orange sparks flew and the four screws were destroyed.

The metal cover fell off.

Before Yomikawa could catch it, the cover fell to the asphalt. The asphalt was moving by so quickly that the cover flew backwards as if it had ricocheted off.

When Yomikawa saw the inside of the box, she let out a groan.

“It looks like there are over 100 cords in here. Don’t tell me I have to cut the red one but not the white one or something like that.”

“Ah ha ha. You can just ignore the cords. There should be three switches at the upper right hand side. First, turn off the middle switch.”

“Ahn? …This one?”

Yomikawa stretched out her arm and hit the middle switch with her index finger.

“Done.”

“That should have activated the safety on the emergency automatic evasion system the criminal is abusing.”

“So we can just hit the brakes now?”

“N-no! This is just an auxiliary safety. It only prevents control of the steering wheel from being suddenly taken away. Basically, it only keeps the criminal from taking control for about 30 seconds after you leave the red circle.”

“Thirty seconds…”

The satellite guidance vehicle was 10 tons. Even if it slammed on the brakes, it might not come to a complete stop in that time. It was the same as how a train could not be easily stopped.

“It looks like removing the lock on the ignition key in order to shut off the motor while it is still running is our best bet. Once the motor is stopped, the emergency automatic evasion system cannot be abused anymore,” said Uiharu.

“Tch. Then let’s get it over with.”

“O-okay. Um, is there an even smaller box in the bottom left hand side of the box? It should be held shut by 8 screws.”

“Found it. So I just have to get this thing open?”

Just as Yomikawa stretched out her arm, a cross wind suddenly blew through.

The satellite guidance vehicle swayed left and right as if the wind had made it falter. That motion caused Yomikawa’s arm to approach the asphalt. A protrusion of the asphalt flying by below tore through the cloth of Yomikawa’s track suit and even scraped at her skin.

“!! Gwaahhh!?”

She frantically pulled her arm back, but lost her grip on the micro cutter in doing so. The tool fell to the asphalt and seemed to disappear instantaneously as it was swept away.

“Yomikawa-san. What’s wrong, Yomikawa-san!?”

“Dammit, I dropped the tool. I can’t get the box open!!”

“No…”

“Is there any other way!? I know! The criminal is interfering remotely, right? So we just need to jam the signal he’s usi-…”

She trailed off because of a shout from Sangaku Youko.

“Get back in!! Hurry!!”

“?”

The instant Yomikawa lifted her head, she saw the edge of an approaching tunnel.

A cold sweat covered her body.

“Shit!!”

She frantically pulled her upper body back into the passenger seat. The thick concrete wall of the tunnel slammed into the passenger door that remained open. With the sound of crushed metal, the door slammed shut like a dragon’s jaws and then fell to the road because its hinges had broken.

Before it fell, a torn portion of the inside of the door became intertwined with the strap of the rucksack lying at the bottom of the passenger side.

(Oh, no! The rest of the tools…!!)

Yomikawa immediately reached out, but she did not make it in time.

With a few clunking noises, the door disappeared from vision.

“Damn!!”

She had survived, but the situation was still not a good one.

The characteristic orange lights of a tunnel surrounded the two women.

Sangaku looked over at Yomikawa’s bloody arm.

“A-are you okay?”

“More or less.,, Hm…?”

As she spoke, Yomikawa put the radio to her ear, but she got no response. The signal may have been cut off when they had entered the tunnel.

And then…

“The wheel…” Sangaku said with a pale expression. “The wheel isn’t responding! What’s going on!?”

(It couldn’t be…)

“A jamming countermeasure! Was it programmed from the beginning to put in an automatic lock if the signal was cut off!?”

“But I never strayed from the course I was told to go on…!!”

Cell phones could be used in some modern tunnels. It was possible that the criminal had mistakenly assumed the one along the path was one of those.

Meanwhile, the satellite guidance vehicle continued on.

It seemed to be continuing on straight ahead, but the tunnel wall on the passenger side was gradually approaching. At that rate, the vehicle would scrape up against the wall and possibly lose its balance and roll on its side.

If the trap used the emergency automatic evasion system, the lock could only last for 100 seconds, but it did not seem they had that much time before they hit the wall.

“Dammit!!”

Yomikawa immediately pulled out a baton and reached out from the opening where the missing passenger door should have been. She was trying to push back even if it was just a little bit. However, this did not even last a single second. The instant the end of the baton touched the concrete wall, a great shock struck Yomikawa’s arm.

The pain was so great, Yomikawa had no choice but to let go of the baton.

At the same, the exit to the tunnel became visible.

Would they hit the wall first or make it out of the exit first?

Fate chose the latter.

The satellite guidance vehicle roared out of the tunnel at tremendous speed and the signal returned. With control of the wheel once more, Sangaku immediately regained the vehicle's balance.

Yomikawa contacted Uiharu over the radio.

"Uiharu! What should we do now? We can't use the ignition key. Is there no other way!?"

However, Uiharu did not respond.

Yomikawa frowned and then finally heard Uiharu speaking. However, it sounded more like she was speaking to herself.

"You have got to be kidding me. This is…?"

♦

Uiharu froze.

Her notebook computer was displaying the destination she had calculated from the satellite guidance vehicle's GPS system. The destination of the vehicle was…

"The international convention center in District 3!?"

The 12 member board of directors that ran Academy City and 7 heads of state of other countries were having a conference there. If the satellite guidance vehicle crashed into that building, the 1500 kilograms of hydrazine would be scattered about, causing more chaos than Uiharu could imagine.

(Kh…)

Uiharu looked around the office.

The atmosphere of the Anti-Skill members had changed. Those adults should have been working to stop the satellite guidance vehicle and to capture the criminal behind it, but it felt as if they were now working on a different objective like a train that had switched tracks. The bespectacled Anti-Skill member was on the phone with someone and he gestured to Uiharu, telling her to continue her work.

(…)

Uiharu repeatedly hit keys on her computer.

She hacked into a local network created only for those in charge and found the exact records she had expected to. The predicted amount of damage, instructions to hospitals people would be transported to, and cleanup afterwards. Those things had taken over the conversation due to self-interest and weighing the possible damages.

(I knew it. They intend to make sure it's stopped before it reaches its destination…)

However, that meant something completely different from before.

They were only trying to protect the VIPs in the international convention center. They had decided civilian casualties would be better than having it carry out its ultimate objective.

"Uiharu," said the bespectacled Anti-Skill man, cutting into Uiharu's thoughts. "If it comes to it, we will need to send a rescue team into that lake. We need to arrange a helicopter, so lend us a hand."

They were already assuming the satellite guidance vehicle would end up in the lake. If she merely followed her orders, she would be abandoning Sangaku Youko.

(Is there anything I can do…?)

Uiharu frantically thought.

She did not want to give up.

(There is. There is something I can do to solve this problem!!)

What she could do was limited from within that office.

And since Anti-Skill had changed its overall plan, they might restrict her actions.

(Given the vehicle's predicted route, it passes by near this office at a single point. If I'm going to do something, it has to be there. If I let this change go by, I probably won't be able to do anything else!!)

"What is it?"

"Nothing," replied Uiharu. "You needed a rescue helicopter, right? Understood. Go ahead and contact the unit. I will deal with the proper paperwork."

After thinking for a bit, Uiharu stood up.

She was not about to go call in a helicopter.

Afterwards, she could write as many formal explanations of her actions as they wanted.

♦

"I have arrived at the designated point. I am about to begin my 'work'," said a man on top of a building.

He put together various metal parts, making a rifle. It was a Metal Eater MX. It was an Academy City 80 cm fully-automatic anti-tank rifle.

The man holding the rifle while lying face down was named Sunazara Chimitsu.

He was a sniper who normally worked outside of Academy City. Once a proper request had been made, he would shoot his target whether it was a robber with a hostage or a politician calling for pacifism.

"I will stop that satellite guidance vehicle along the road just as you instructed, Anti-Skill."

Sunazara's expression remained the same as he held that special rifle that could blow up a real tank from a distance of 2000 meters.

He followed his clients' orders and unhesitatingly pulled the trigger.

The giant bullet he fired sliced through the air and attacked its target with frightening accuracy.

♦

Yomikawa felt a noise reverberating within her gut like fireworks bursting in the night sky.

(What…?)

The sound was coming from a distance.

However, Sangaku gave a shout from the driver's seat next to her.

"Th-the GPS!!"

Yomikawa quickly turned toward the screen and saw some additional information on an accident. An overpass at a point about 3 kilometers north of them had collapsed, blocking off the road that ran beneath.

And it seemed the route being given to the satellite guidance vehicle passed through that area. As Yomikawa watched, more and more overpasses collapsed, blocking other routes. She could tell someone was doing it intentionally.

“Dammit. What is going on…?”

“Yomikawa-san!!” came a voice over the radio.

Uiharu must have been running somewhere because she sounded out of breath.

“We know what the criminal is after. His target is the international convention center some VIPs are gathered in! It seems the higher ups are taking drastic measures in order to protect their guests. Have you come across any kind of obstruction!?”

(Oh, so that’s what this is…)

Yomikawa understood instantly.

If they continued forward, they would run right into the rubble, but if they tried to go around it, the emergency automatic evasion system would take control and cause them to crash. In either case, they would not reach the international convention center.

By fiddling with the GPS, Yomikawa found an artificial lake near the first overpass to collapse. It seemed to be inviting them to crash the vehicle into it if they did not want to die.

“Dammit…”

Yomikawa gritted her teeth.

It was true that using the water as a cushion would reduce the vehicle’s momentum to a certain extent and it lowered the odds of having the satellite’s fuel released. It was possible that would end things without letting a single civilian die. But what would happen to the driver? There would be no leniency in the shock of the crash. What would happen once she was thrown out into the depths of the cold lake while unconscious and with broken limbs?

The higher ups had approved of that plan.

They had completely forgotten that the driver was another civilian who had gotten caught up in it all.

“Hell no!! I won’t let that happen!! Hey, Uiharu. I’m going to try to find something I can use as a tool. I’m going to try to continue the work we were doing before!!”

“I am…headed there, too! There is a single point where I can contact the vehicle…!!”

Meanwhile, the dead end came into view.

At the end of a long, long straightaway, gray dust could be seen rising up almost at the horizon. That was most likely the end. If they did not stop the satellite guidance vehicle by that point, the true tragedy would begin.

Yomikawa searched through the dashboard in an attempt to find something – anything – that could be used to turn the screws sealing that box shut. As long as there was any kind of hope, she would not give up. Her eyes showed her determination.

She scattered small items like a map or a flashlight on the floor and started tossing them aside after glancing at them and deciding they would be of no help.

“We’ll be turning right at the next intersection, so brace yourself!!” warned Sangaku.

While looking through the items scattered about, Yomikawa did as instructed.

Then she noticed something odd.

The automatic voice from the GPS remained silent.

Suddenly, the giant vehicle turned left instead of right.

“Wha-…?”

Yomikawa had been leaning to the side, expecting a turn to the right, so the actual turn to the left caused her to lose her balance. She frantically tried to find something to grab onto, but her hands found only air.

(Don’t tell me…)

In Yomikawa’s wobbling vision, she caught sight of the GPS. Sangaku’s hand was holding down the mute button.

She had lied.

She had purposefully told Yomikawa the opposite direction in order to throw her out.

(Dammit.)

The passenger side had no door.

After losing her balance, Yomikawa fell out of the vehicle.

“Gwaaahhh!!”

Yomikawa did not fall on harsh asphalt.

Some store must have been in the process of being remodeled, because a light truck and a giant stuffed bear twice as tall as Yomikawa were located near the sidewalk. Yomikawa struck the soft cushion which surrounded her with softness.

Even so, a great shock pierced her body.

Her breathing truly stopped for an instant, but she felt no anger toward Sangaku.

Sangaku Youko had not betrayed her.

She was not the one behind the incident.

Yomikawa had seen something that proved that to her.

“You…idiot…”

Just before she had fallen out the door, she had caught sight of Sangaku Youko’s face.

While desperately gripping the steering wheel, the woman had used all her strength to put a smile on her face as she had looked toward Yomikawa with tears welling up in her eyes.

“You goddamn idiooooooooooooooooooooooottttttttttttttttt!!”

By the time Yomikawa yelled that, the giant vehicle was already gone.

Its driver was on her way to bring the whole incident to a close.

♦

“…Kh…”

As Sangaku Youko drove the satellite guidance vehicle along, her breath caught in her throat.

(Good.)

Her strength left her and she almost collapsed onto the steering wheel, but Sangaku managed to pull herself together.

(I can’t let that woman die here…)

She could now see it with the naked eye.

The overpass’s girder had been destroyed, causing the overpass to crumble and block the road. It was as if a barricade of rubble had been set up to block the satellite guidance vehicle’s path.

And there was a manmade lake off to the side.

Luckily, Sangaku could ignore the instructions from the GPS for 30 seconds thanks to the switch Yomikawa had pressed in the box below. With that much time, she could drive the 30 meter mass of metal into the lake.

“Sorry about this,” said a nervous voice over the vehicle’s radio.

It was the voice of the bespectacled Anti-Skill member. She had met him when the arrangement of the guard vehicles had been explained to her.

“We are calling a rescue team into the area. Even if you crash into the lake, they will immediately go in to rescue you. The passenger door is broken off, correct? In that case, you are less likely to become trapped within the vehicle.”

“Yes.” Sangaku Youko thought about various things, swallowed, and then finally continued speaking. “Thank you.”

With those two words, her mind was made up.

She heard one last word of apology before the connection was cut off.

She had to do it then.

If she let the chance go by, she would have no choice but to crash into the pile of rubble. If the satellite was destroyed, its toxic fuel, hydrazine, would be scattered about. At least a one kilometer radius would be contaminated. Seasonal winds could spread the effects. There would be tens of thousands of victims. She had to prevent that from happening.

(I can do this.)

She clenched the steering wheel so tightly her hands hurt.

A single photo was stuck in one corner of the driver’s compartment.

It was a photo filled with the smiles of her entire family.

(I will do this…!!)

Just as she had shaken off all doubts and was about to turn the wheel, she heard static coming from the radio.

“…Most admirable,” said a young girl’s voice.

The girl sounded about the same age as Sangaku's own daughter. She was pretty sure it was the Judgment girl who had been helping Yomikawa over the radio.

"Sangaku Youko-san, you a truly wonderful person. Just by seeing what you are doing here, I feel like I can do something that is not like me at all."

"What…?"

"Simply put, someone like you should not die here."

Sangaku was completely bewildered and the vehicle passed underneath a walkway.

She then heard a thud come from the roof.

(It couldn't be…)

Whatever had fallen down was unable to rid itself of its momentum, so it seemed to slide toward the back of the vehicle. A series of dull thuds moved toward the portion of the vehicle where the satellite was restrained.

"Gh…cough!! U-uuhh… That was nothing like the mobile we used to simulate falling…"

Sangaku heard more coughing and the roaring wind.

That was enough for her to understand what had happened.

"S-sorry I took so long," said the girl.

The girl had jumped down onto the vehicle from the walking path in order to save Sangaku Youko.

"I am Uiharu Kazari from Judgment's 177th Branch Office. I will now be taking action to protect the peace by bringing this situation to a close and protecting you, a civilian."

♦

Uiharu Kazari had given that courageous announcement, but her consciousness was actually a little hazy.

That was the first time she had ever jumped from a bridge onto a moving vehicle. She had not known much of anything regarding how to do it right. First she had failed her landing and then she had struck the metal framework around the satellite, so she had blood seeping from her forehead.

Even so, Uiharu had not dropped her radio.

She had needed it to speak with Sangaku Youko who had been cornered all alone by the situation.

“What are you doing?” asked Sangaku, utterly dumbfounded. “There is no other way. Even if you try to deal with the box down below now, you won’t have enough time! Can’t you see the dead end up ahead!?”

“Don’t worry…”

There were plenty of things Uiharu wanted to say and there were things she logically should have explained, but she cast all that aside. None of that was what she had to say first.

“I *will* save you, so let’s survive this together.”

“Don’t be ridiculous. I can’t bet on something that will never succeed. That satellite you’re leaning on is filled with hydrazine. We can’t let that get out. The best option is for me to drive into the lake alone!!”

“That isn’t true,” Uiharu said, drawing out her last bit of strength. “Your death is not the best option. I will not accept that.”

“There is no other way!!”

“Then why are your children crying!?”

“…!?”

“Those children came all the way to the investigation headquarters. Even as the adults of Anti-Skill tried to stop them, they kept asking them to save their mother. So how can you say the best option is for you to give up!?”

“Well…”

“To the children of this city, an intimidating PE teacher is an object of fear. And trained Anti-Skill members are tough enough to make even most adults afraid of them. Those children stood their ground even as a group of those threatening adults surrounded them and told them to leave!! They truly do not want you to die!! There is no way any child would be happy to have their parent die!! That cannot possibly be the best option!!”

After shouting that, Uiharu smiled.

Her expression could not be seen over the radio, but the emotion could be heard in her voice.

“…I will show you that miracles exist.” Her voice was soft yet serious. “I will show you a miracle that overcomes the lack of courage of those who have given up on you and that

will not leave those wishing for your safety in sorrow. Let's have a good laugh when we see everyone's shocked faces."

For a bit, there was only silence.

But then that silence turned into a groan that in turn became a yell.

Sangaku yelled out two names.

Uiharu guessed that those names belonged to the two children she had seen.

"…But how?" asked Sangaku Youko in despair. "This vehicle truly cannot be stopped!! If we do anything, the emergency automatic evasion system will crash it!! We only have free reign for about 30 seconds! That isn't enough time to come to a complete stop and turn the key to turn off the motor!! The criminal will gain control first!! How are you planning on stopping this thing!?"

"Don't worry," Uiharu said with a smile. "I will be giving you a sign. When I do, step on the brake with everything you have. No matter what happens, do not let up on the brake. That will solve everything."

"But…!!"

"Please trust me. It will stop."

"…"

Sangaku fell silent.

The vehicle came up alongside the lake. It was only a few hundred meters from the rubble of the collapsed overpass. However, Sangaku paid no heed to the escape route that was the lake.

Instead she said, "Understood. Give me the signal when you're ready."

"Will do."

Uiharu prepared herself and breathed in deeply.

"Now! Brake!!"

Just as she shouted out, every tire on the satellite guidance vehicle started screeching. The high pitched noise pierced her ears. Every braking mechanism aboard the vehicle was being used, but it continued to slide forward. That was because the vehicle weighed 10 tons and it had been travelling at the tremendous speed of 120 kph.

The brakes were not going to work like normal.

The situation was more like that of a train than of a vehicle on the road.

A train would slowly lower its speed as it approached its destination station and would then use its brakes to stop at its designated spot. If the train suddenly put on its brakes at full speed, it would continue to slide along the track and not stop until it had travelled over 100 more meters.

The satellite guidance vehicle acted the same.

The brake was being pressed down to the floor, but the vehicle would not stop!!

“What are you going to do!?” Sangaku shouted.

She was not simply shouting out due to anger that had no outlet. She truly wanted to know what her comrade in arms was planning to do in order to save them. What method would Uiharu use to prevent either the criminal from taking control or the vehicle crashing into the pile of rubble?

That was why Uiharu gave a slight smile.

Her forehead was cut and her consciousness was hazy, but she still spoke.

“Do you know what drag racers that travel hundreds of kilometers per hour use to brake?”

Sangaku remained silent.

She must have known. And that was what Uiharu was about to do.

Uiharu thought she heard a voice telling her to stop, but she ignored it.

“A drag chute!!”

At that moment, Uiharu was holding onto something like a ladder laid down flat that was located above the satellite. It was a simple walkway stretching from the “roof” portion of the metal framework. To affix her body to the simple walkway, Uiharu had several ropes bound around her small frame. She then reached a hand for the backpack like object that had been on her back the whole time.

It was the parachute she had not known how to remove.

She gave a forceful yank on the release cord and the backpack exploded. The giant white umbrella that appeared from within spread out all at once due to the great amount of wind created by the satellite guidance vehicle.

Air resistance held a surprising amount of power.

Its effects increased the faster an object was going, so it was used for the air brakes of fighters as well as drag racers.

Uiharu was doing the same thing.

The vehicle's brakes alone could not bring it to a complete stop in 30 seconds. In that case, she had to add on a new brake that would stop its motion more quickly.

If it came to a complete stop for even an instant, the key could be turned to shut off the motor.

Once the motor was shut off, the emergency automatic evasion system could no longer be used by the criminal.

That meant there was a single thing she had to do.

She had to use the parachute to stop the satellite guidance vehicle as soon as possible!!

(Gh...!!)

The belts holding the parachute to her body and the several ropes binding her to the metal ladder-like walkway dug into Uiharu's body. She felt pain as if wires as thick as thumbs were constricting her body. Uiharu cried out in pain, but she also clung to the metal framework even tighter. Tremendous strength entered her slender fingers. The mass of wind caught in the parachute violently tried to tear her small frame from the vehicle. It was as if gravity had changed directions by 90 degrees and had increased several times over. It was like she was hanging from the edge of a cliff with weights tied to her legs.

(I won't...let go...!)

However, if she ran out of strength, it was all over.

The vehicle would crash into the pile of rubble, truly bringing it all to an end.

(I won't...let myself let go...!!)

Suddenly, she heard a dull denting noise.

(No...it can't be...!)

The noise was not coming from Uiharu's hands. It was coming from the ladder-like walkway her body was bound to. It must not have been designed to have that much of a burden placed on it because the bolts binding the framework and the walkway broke and flew off one after another.

Uiharu did not even have time to think.

The overwhelming power of the wind started tearing a portion of the walkway off with Uiharu still attached.

Some of the ropes must have been attached at the joints because they grew slack and the walkway and Uiharu become completely detached.

"...!!"

With nothing left supporting her, Uiharu flew up into the air.

The power of the parachute started pulling her back.

Even so, Uiharu desperately stretched out her arms.

♦

...In that instant, Uiharu Kazari lost consciousness for a moment.

But even subconsciously, she continued to grasp the metal framework. She had reached a different part of the framework further back from the simple walkway that had been ripped away.

The situation was not a good one.

Uiharu was still being pulled by the great air resistance created by the parachute and an unpleasant creaking came from her arms. Intense pain ran through them as if the joints were being forcibly stretched by a special machine. She truly thought the fingers holding onto the framework were going to break.

Even so, Uiharu desperately endured.

Even as the violence of the parachute assaulted her, she gritted her teeth and endured.

Her consciousness was dim, but she recalled one thing clearly.

She recalled the words she had heard in the Anti-Skill office and the feelings those words had brought to her.

Save my mom.

(...Yes.)

She would save her.

"…Of course I will."

No matter what, she would make sure there were no sacrifices, including Sangaku-san.

"Of course I'll stop this damn thing!!"

The screech of the brakes pierced her ears.

The horrible smell of rubber scraping the asphalt reached her nose.

The giant vehicle continued to slide and the pile of rubble from the collapsed overpass approached.

The parachute was spread out from the mass of wind it was catching.

Uiharu Kazari swallowed down the intense pain and shouted out with all her heart.

And…

♦

The giant satellite guidance vehicle had travelled over 7 kilometers since the message had first arrived on the GPS system, but it was now stopped right in front of the pile of rubble.

The giant mass of steel was no longer moving.

The front windshield was completely shattered. The vehicle had stopped only a few centimeters away from the pile of rubble, but a sharp protrusion of concrete had still stabbed into it.

The blade-like piece of concrete had pierced the windshield, ripped apart the driver's headrest, and scattered the white stuffing throughout the vehicle.

Sangaku Youko had immediately moved her head to the side and just barely avoided the sharp fragment.

"…"

Her hand reached for the key near the steering wheel.

It was the ignition key for the vehicle's electric motor.

She turned it to the off position.

The satellite guidance vehicle was now completely turned off.

The criminal who had abused the emergency automatic evasion system could no longer interfere.

Sangaku Youko thought on that truth for a bit.

They had won.

They had defeated the cowardly criminal.

And most importantly, her children would not need to grieve.

She had managed to protect those children's smiles.

"Ha ha."

She opened her mouth wide and laughed.

"Ah ha ha ha!! Ah ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha!!"

♦

Uiharu put her hand on the side of the satellite, put her feet on the metal framework, and slowly climbed down form the back of the vehicle. Her palms were dyed red, the area between her thumb and forefinger seemed to have split open a bit, and the area from her shoulders to her wrist had been turned a uniform purplish color. Pain ran across her entire body and quite a bit of blood was flowing from her forehead.

A horrible smell came from the vehicle's tires.

When she looked at the road, she saw black lines stretching for a few hundred meters back. The overwhelming friction had blown a few of the giant tires. The damage was like that from an attack by a monster. The great energy had been like violence itself. And Uiharu and Sangaku had overcome it together.

"..."

Uiharu just stared at the scene for a while.

But before she could think too deeply, all strength left her body.

Her injuries and the intense relief had released all of her tension.

With her mind blank, Uiharu looked over at the driver's seat.

Yomikawa and Uiharu had struggled to save Sangaku Youko.

However, Sangaku had been the only one to fight from the very beginning to the very end. How had she been able to gather enough strength at the very, very end? After thinking on that for a bit, Uiharu spoke in a cracking, vacant voice.

"...Not giving up sure is amazing."

♦

Two figures stood a short distance away.

One was Misaka Mikoto and the other was Shirai Kuroko.

They were both young ladies from a prestigious psychic powers development school called Tokiwadai Middle School.

"Well, it looks like they made it somehow or another," Mikoto said with a sigh.

She must have been planning to do something because sparks were flying around her. For better or for worse, she had not needed to do whatever it was in the end.

"But I didn't know Uiharu-san was that hot-blooded. Putting on a parachute and acting as a human brake is crazy."

"Well, regardless of how she looks, Uiharu did volunteer to join Judgment. Even if it does not come out on the surface much, there might just be something burning deep within her."

"...And you left that hot-blooded girl on her own to go do your own investigation, didn't you? Did you find the person behind all this?"

"Really, how many times do I have to tell you, onee-sama? You're a civilian."

Despite what Shirai said, her expression looked somehow glad.

She shook her head as if giving up on something before speaking.

"There are traces of a falsified order allowing remote reception of the GPS data from the satellite guidance vehicle. It was done via two or three servers, so I doubt the actual person has been found yet," she said while looking at her cell phone that must have been displaying a file on the incident. "That Anti-Skill woman and Uiharu were not shaken off because the criminal was relying on the GPS information to keep an eye on the vehicle. The Anti-Skill vehicle that approached was noticed because of its own GPS system, but the criminal had no way of noticing the person who climbed aboard from it."

“So basically,” said Mikoto with a nod and a wink. “You know where this bastard is, right?”

“Yes, it is time for an old fashioned arrest. Want to come along, onee-sama?”

“Do I even have to answer that?”

Bluish-white sparks flew.

A smile unbefitting of the image her prestigious school had spread across her face.

“I much prefer doing things this way.”

AFTERWORD

To those who are always purchasing these: welcome back. To those who for whatever reason are starting here: welcome.

This is Kamachi Kazuma.

This is a collection of old stories from various magazines, so there is no single occult keyword for this book.

The plans to create each of these came about for different reasons than the main series and each one was sent out to the world under different circumstances. Whether they are the same as ever, different from normal, or just how they are in general are things I will leave to you all to determine.

Since each individual story is independent of the others, I will split up the afterword as well.

Stiyl Magnus.

This one takes up the most space by far of the stories in this book and the circumstances of its creation were probably the most twisted.

It focuses on Stiyl, so it is basically a magic story, but as those of you who read it through to the end know, science is involved at the root of things. I think this gives it a nice Index-y feel to it.

Mark Space.

I suppose you could say this is a portion of the Stiyl Magnus story. It was only published in an even smaller magazine than Dengeki Bunko Magazine, so it may be the rarest of the stories in this book.

Its protagonist is simply a member of a magic cabal and it touches on the formation of those organizations, so it may be the oddest of the group.

Kamijou Touma.

This story was published in a special Toradora vs Index magazine. I was told to make a light story that got across the atmosphere of the series to those who had never read it, but the next thing I knew, it had aliens in it.

However, I think it still explained the basic flow of the series. Kamijou Touma's misfortune gets him wrapped up in some incident, science and magic forces collide, and it is all resolved by a battle in the end.

While the Martian microbes clearly do, the Tattva the magician uses is also related to space.

Uiharu Kazari.

I was asked to make a short story of A Certain Scientific Railgun featuring one of the side characters (i.e. not Mikoto) and I ended up going with the unexpected human drag chute. And since she seemed like the least likely character to do something like this, I chose Uiharu.

When I first put together the last scene, things grew and grew as I wondered what I should do. My editor kept telling me Uiharu couldn't pull off action-y things like that and so I needed to give her some kind of help, so I added a few little items to help here or there.

As usual, my illustrator Haimura-san and my editor Miki-san were huge helps, but this time so was Fuyukawa Motoi-san, Mine-san, Ogino-san and the others. I am truly grateful.

I also thank all of you readers. I get quite a few requests for short stories for magazines, but I think it's thanks to your support that I can do basically what I want even within those.

It is time to close the pages for now while praying that the pages of the next book will be opened.

And I lay my pen down for now.

But aren't there also the Official Pirate Books and A Certain Prophecy Index…?

-Kamachi Kazuma